# Lead Belly

## A Life in Pictures

Steidl

edited by Tiny Robinson and John Reynolds with introduction by Tom Waits/Poems by Tyehimba Jess and foreword by Glenn O'Brien

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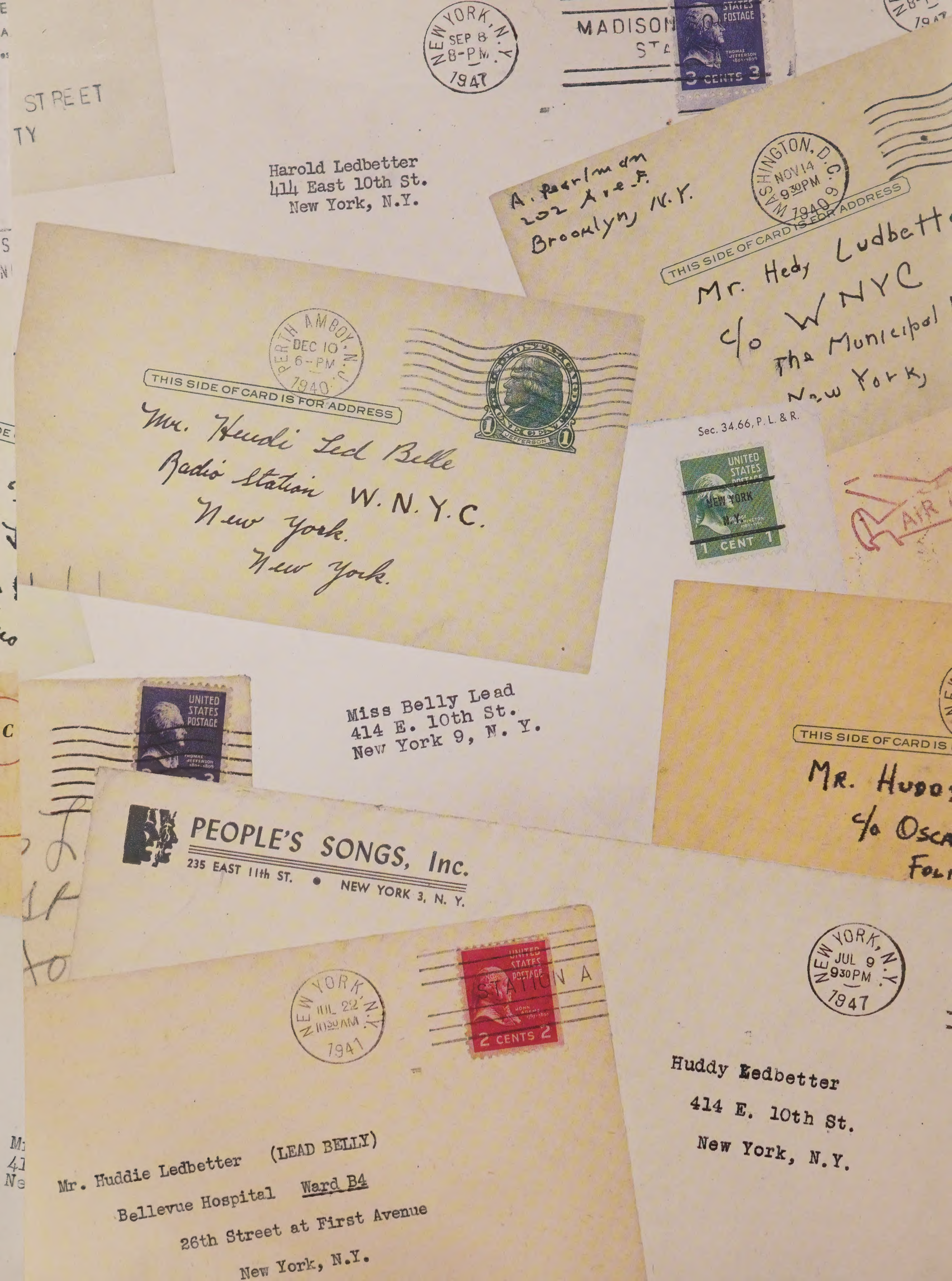

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New York, N.Y.

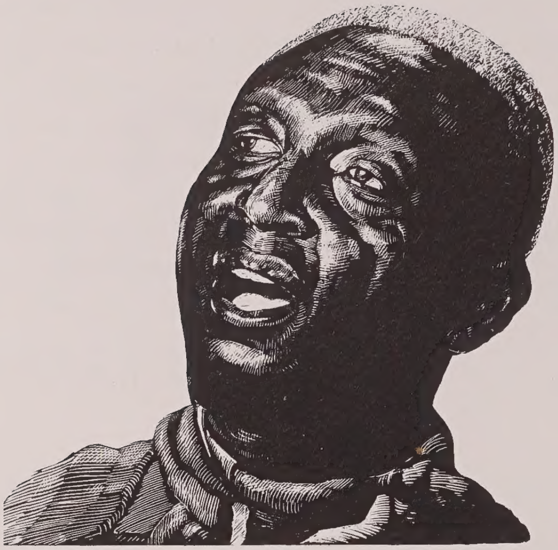
for
Aunt Martha Ledbetter
and
Sean Killeen

# Lead Belly

## A Life in Pictures

edited by Tiny Robinson and John Reynolds
with introduction by Tom Waits/Poems by Tyehimba Jess
and foreword by Glenn O'Brien

Steidl



Huddie Ledbetter

Huddie Ledbetter

*Bust by Steve Spencer*

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# INTRODUCTION: Lead Belly

> *"He died the day before I was born*
> *and I like to think I passed him in the hall*
> *and he banged into me and knocked me over."*
> **Tom Waits**

**by Tom Waits**

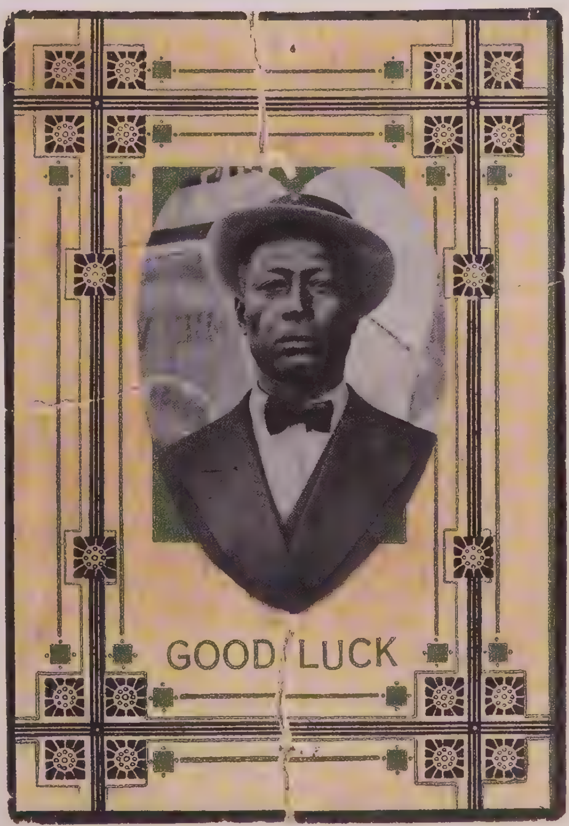
Songs just like being around some folks more than others. They won't just live anywhere. Birds like some trees better than others. We don't know why… making up songs is just like coming up with something crazy to do with the air besides just breathing it. Seems like a waste to just breathe it in and then push it back out quietly.

It must have excited the air to go through Lead Belly as ordinary oxygen and come out the other side as the Midnight Special or Silvie or Ella Louise or Rock Island Line. There's a bird in South America whose song is so powerful and lovely, and who sings so rarely that when he does sing all the animals in the forest are quiet until his song is finished. They say to hear it brings luck, to see it insures you a place in heaven. Lead Belly was loud. I was born the day after he died, on December 7, 1949, and I passed him in the hall. He was as strong as Jack Johnson, he was louder than Caruso. Songs climb up some folks like a vine climbs a trellis. There is something in Lead Belly's voice so urgent, "Come here right now and listen. Drop what ever you're doing…" he's hollering to you from the next hill over. It carried bold and impatient. He broke microphones, they weren't prepared for his impolite delivery. When I first heard his voice, I knew it already.

In mole communities they reward the brave ones. The ones known for tunneling beneath great rivers who faced the dangers involved in pulling off such an incredible feat of engineering, the ones responsible for taking other moles safely to the other side.

Lead Belly is as much a part of the natural world as crows are, as dogs are, children playing in the yard are, trains are, jails are, second floor apartments are, and his songs are safe on the other side.

And they're all a part of you now.



*Oldest known photo of Lead Belly, circa 1918*

photo by Bernard Hoffman, 1937

# FOREWORD: Inevitable

*"Lead Belly would go inside of himself and his eyes would become very red and penetrating. He seemed to look more and more inside of himself than at the audience."*
**Oscar Brand**

**by Glenn O'Brien**

I remember "Goodnight, Irene." I was three when Lead Belly's signature song, recorded by the Weavers, hit number one on the hit parade. It wafted up the stairs from the television while I was supposed to be sleeping and got into my head and never left. I didn't know about romance but I could relate to seeing you in my dreams. I didn't know what catchy meant but I was caught. The song was relentless.

Relentlessness is one of nature's better qualities. Beyond the human norm, relentlessness gives rise to the idea of gods and eternity, but it works well in mortals too, creating masterpieces and crusades, miracles and happy endings. Relentlessness implies certitude and zeal, and so, sadly, it is increasingly lacking in the current blasé climate of disposability known as pop culture. Relentlessness is activist knowledge. It's a divine sort of affliction.

"Rasta don't believe," Peter Tosh once said to me, "Rasta know."

Knowledge, acquired directly from personal experience and five or six senses, is what gives Rastas, Gnostics, magicians and great artists their special edge. Faith is okay, but next to knowledge it's tentative and iffy, kid stuff. The knowledgeable are not lukewarm. They know. In their guts and in their bones, there's no question. Surety makes them brave. And sometimes foolish too, but if they play their cards well, it generally makes them wise.

Sometimes, the knowledgeable are overwhelmed and become fanatic and inaccurate. But whoever is up to the knowledge is a true fan (without "a tic,") and an instrument of inspiration and change. He clears the air for a future where that knowledge will spread. And that's Lead Belly's fate: a force of nature, an inevitability.

John Reynolds is a distinguished fan. Some might find his enthusiasms obscure; in fact they're vital. Reynolds is no show-off collector of ephemera; he is an art missionary and keeper-of-flames. And here, in your hands, is an eternal flame he's tended over several decades. Here is the bright light of Lead Belly, a torch now passed from the hands of the initiated to the general public.

John Reynolds knows, through his own sense-driven perception, the enormous importance of Huddie Ledbetter and he has amassed a fascinating treasury of testimony to it, against the odds. Against the odds because Lead Belly represents a polar opposite of today's pop idol: a master songwriter, a virtuoso on an uncommon instrument, an idealist, a man of character and substance, a mighty current in the river of American music. He is a classical musician of America.

Knowledge of Lead Belly inspired Reynolds, casually at first, ardently later, to become an investigator, archivist, curator, custodian and proponent of the man. Reynolds started out, like any fan from the folk era, simply loving the music, but then the music started talking to him. The songs got into his head as did the extraordinary story of the man who made them. As knowledge grew so did enthusiasm. Soon he was a self-appointed professor and chair of Lead Belly studies. Tiny Robinson, Lead Belly's favorite niece started out with a more direct connection to Lead Belly, but over the years the authors became impromptu family and collaborators. Their knowledge is now in your hands. Consider this extended liner notes to the complete works, or as a gospel of the next testament. But whatever it is, as with any important batch of knowledge, you'll know what to do. Dig.

# LEAD BELLY

*"I'm just doing stuff, Letting the people know what American folk music is; Unwritten music, made up by the people."*

**by Pete Seeger**

I was nineteen, in New York City, when I first met Huddie Ledbetter. He was not tall — perhaps five feet seven or eight — but compactly built, and he moved with the soft grace of an athlete. He was grey-haired — in his fifties, I'd say. Always neatly dressed.

There I was, trying my best to shed my Harvard upbringing, scorning to waste money on clothes other than blue jeans. But Lead Belly always had a clean white shirt and tie, well-pressed suit and shined shoes. He didn't need to affect that he was a workingman. His powerful ringing voice, and his muscular hands moving like a dancer over the strings of his big twelved-stringed guitar, his honesty and pride, showed he was a workingman.

He was wonderful with children. He'd get them singing with him, clapping their hands and swaying their bodies. It was hard to believe the stories we read of his violent youth. I have always figured that here was a clear example of what naturally brings otherwise gentle people into violence. Those little southern honky-tonks were and still are known for fights and killings. And the southern prison farms to which Negroes are sent are murderous places.

That Lead Belly survived prison at all is remarkable. Perhaps the guards liked to keep him to entertain them with his guitar. I guess he learned what so many Negro entertainers have had to learn to do on occasion — "make a fool of yourself and take the white folks' money". But he stayed alive and got out of prison.

Up north he met a new kind of white people, the enthusiastic young people in the progressive movement in New York City. He never wanted to live in the south again. He and his wife Martha had a little flat on the Lower East Side. Woody Guthrie and I visited him there often, and made music together with him, till the neighbors complained of the noise. I was proud that he accepted me. Perhaps he wondered at my earnestness, trying to learn folk music.

What a tragedy he died! It was just eight months before his song "Goodnight, Irene" was selling two million copies, and making Hit Parade history. If he could have lived ten more years he would have seen all his dreams as a musician come true — young people by the millions learning and singing his songs. But in the nineteen thirties and forties the Hit Parade was dominated by the big bands, and all entertainment, to be successful, had to be geared to Hollywood standards. So Lead Belly sang for left-wing causes, Greenwich Village parties, and very occasional college concerts. We loved him, but I wish we hadn't been his only audience.

Too bad he was never in movies. He was an expert at country-style buck-and-wing clog dancing, In one number he would imitate the gait of all the women of Shreveport, high and low. And another dance accompanied the story of a duck hunter. His guitar became the gun. Pow!

He'd sometimes get on a rhyming kick. For a couple of hours on and every sentence that came out of his mouth was rhymed. Sitting in the car, on our way to bookings, he'd go on fanciful flights of poetry and imagination.

O Huddie! How we miss you. Sometimes

< *Josh White, Lead Belly and Pete Seeger, Underwood Archives*

audiences couldn't understand your Louisiana accent. Sometimes young people thought your style of music was old-fashioned. But you were always honestly yourself, never trying to pretend you were someone else, never trying to be a chameleon for the fashions of the day.

He was not the cleverest guitar player; he didn't try and play the fanciest chords, the trickiest progressions, or the fastest number of notes. Rather, the notes he played were powerful and meaningful, especially "the bass runs".

Perhaps this modern age is not liable to produce again such a combination of genuine folk artist and virtuoso. Because nowadays when the artist becomes a virtuoso, there is normally a much greater tendency to cease being folk. But when Lead Belly rearranged a folk melody he had come across — he often did, for he had a wonderful ear for melody and rhythm — he did it in line with his own great folk traditions.

Looking back, I think that the most important thing I learned from him was the straight-forward approach, the direct honesty. He bequeathed to us also, it is true, a couple hundred of the best songs any of us will ever know. I wish people would stop trying to imitate his accent, and rather learn from his subtle simplicity, and his powerful pride.

In 1949, he started having to use a cane to go on stage. It was the "Lou Gehrig disease" Amyotropic Lateral Sclerosis (I guess now they say ALS) . His voice, always soft and husky when speaking, still rang out high on the melodies, but his hands grew stiffer and less certain on the guitar. Then one day he was gone, and we were left with regrets that we had not treasured him more.

PETE SEEGER SINGS
LEADBELLY

# LEAD BELLY'S SONGS

*"No Lead Belly, no Beatles."*
**George Harrison**

**by Alan Lomax**

Born in 1888 near Shreveport, Louisiana, he was christened Huddie Ledbetter. Later his buddies on southern work gangs gave him the nickname which stuck to him for the rest of his life: they called him Lead — or tough — Belly, because he could set the pace for the cotton-picking gangs all day and make music for the barrelhouse dances all night.

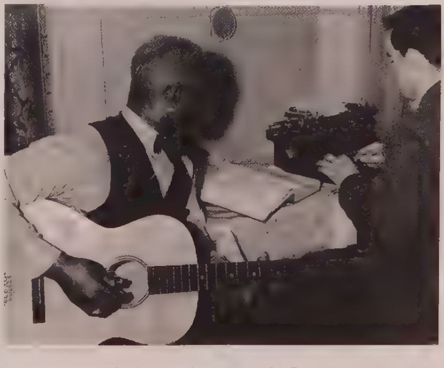
Lead Belly had the strength of a tiger and the heart of a champion. He was born a champion and died one, struck down by the same disease which paralyzed the great Lou Gehrig. When Lead Belly boasted that he was "king of the twelve-string guitar players of the world," he meant that he had bested every other twelve-string player he had ever met. Like any other master musician, he acquired and polished his technique by hours of daily practice. When his cue came, he sprang rather than walked on stage, his handsome face alight with passion, his whole being dedicated to the conquest of his audience. Professor George Lyman Kittridge, dean of American folklorists, heard him at Harvard in 1935, and whispered, "He's a demon, Lomax, a demon!"

In the Greek sense he was demonic, that is, a man inspired by music and rhythm. Pat Neff, the no-pardon Texas governor, heard him sing and broke all his campaign promises when he set Lead Belly free. My father and I recorded him in the Louisiana pen in 1933 and we, too, became possessed by Lead Belly. We carried his pardon appeal recording to the Governor of Louisiana, who promptly paroled him. Then we devoted ourselves to his career for twelve months. We were hunting ballads and we had met a great folk artist.

His voice in those days was clear, sweet and far-carrying, like a powerful jazz trumpet. Under his magic fingers his battered, green twelve-string guitar "talked like a natural man." The twelve-string had come to him from Mexican street singers in Dallas, but the music Lead Belly created for it was a folk history of East Texas and backwoods-Louisiana slave dance tunes, children's games, songs, cotton-picking chants, field hollers, early ragtime, the western Negro ballads, the early blues. His was the flower of the Southwestern folksong tradition, refined and recreated by a true creative artist.

His first white audiences could not understand a syllable of his broad southern dialect, but he set them on fire with sheer power. When he learned to compromise with Northern ways and "bring his words out plain," the fire was dimmed a bit, but his folk poems seized the imaginations of his hearers and he became the central figure of the developing American folksong movement. Lead Belly was the performer everyone thought of when they wanted honesty, authenticity and power.

His scores of recordings inspired a whole generation of young people in England, where song was a dead art, to take up their guitars and sing again. English "skiffle" is, to a very large extent, a trans-Atlantic reflection of Lead Belly. His favorite songs — "Pick a Bale of Cotton" and "Goodnight, Irene" — are sung all over the world in scores of languages.



*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

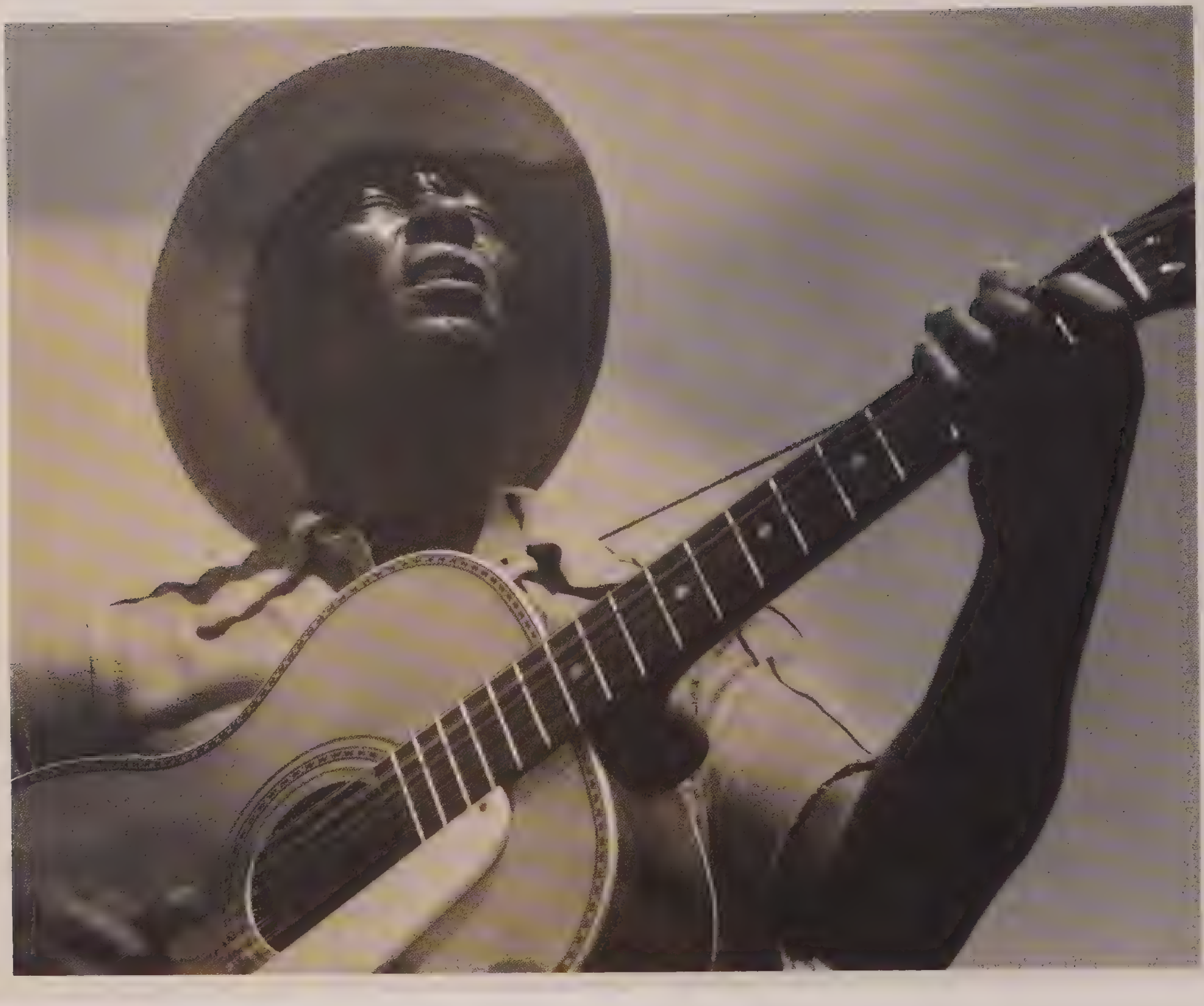


photo by Blanding Sloan and Wah Mong Chang

# CONNECTIONS

*"For vitality, breadth, depth of repertoire and whiplike emotional impact, there has never been anyone quite like Lead Belly."*
**Nat Hentoff**

**by Trevor Midgley**

Let's put a few things on the table.

Mozart was a great musician — innovative, vibrant, charismatic. I have to say however that I'm sure that, had I met him, I wouldn't have liked him and I'm equally sure he wouldn't have liked me.

But he was an all-time great.

My mother could never understand how you could possibly like someone's music if their character and life style didn't appeal. My mother loved Glenn Miller but "Oh, those Rolling Stones. And that Mick Jagger — what must his mother think!"

I started hammering my grandmother's piano when I was six, took up guitar at twelve, and for the next seven years played with "The Raiders" rock group out of Leeds in northern England. When I was seventeen however, something hit me like a train.

At W. H. Smith's music shop in Leeds, I came across a "bargain issue" record on the Society label called *Leadbelly Sings & Plays*.

I know now how the record came to be issued — this was 1963 and the Beatles, the Stones, the Yardbirds were busily repackaging the blues for export. Over here, many labels were releasing authentic original recordings to cash in on the R&B boom.

What I don't know is why I bought *Leadbelly Sings & Plays*. I knew nothing of the man, or his story — maybe it was just the name. But the record changed my life.

Other influences were coming along, mostly from the US. Tom Paxton and Phil Ochs sang the social issues of the time and Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell and others hollered across the decades. But mostly it was Lead Belly.

So I bought a twelve-string guitar, took it down to 'C' tuning and started singing *Fannin Street, Frankie and Albert* and *De Kalb Blues*. A publicity photo from the time shows me, suited, with bow tie and twelve-string, a perfect mix of the Yorkshire Urban Delta Blues.

I left the band in early 1966 to concentrate on song writing and on developing my own twelve-string technique.

The Beatles, who had done so much to reposition music, had in fact caused a major problem — stores were awash with twelve-string guitars. Following their wide use of the instrument, thousands of players bought twelve-strings, captivated by the full, ringing tones. Many quickly found out just how boring an instrument it can be!

The truth, as Lead Belly, Leo Kottke, Pete Seeger and (with all humility) I can attest is that the twelve-string is not just a six-string with six additional strings to play with. It demands technique which is light years away from a six-string if the full range and power is to be brought to the surface. Lead Belly had it, par excellence!

I released a couple of albums with the 'twelve' in the late '60s/early '70s. The style was now very different to Lead Belly, but the connections were still there.

My guitar is a 1966 Harmony. (Harmony had taken over the Stella brand name, and in fact my instrument is not dissimilar to Lead Belly's 1930s Stella from the Oscar Schmidt days.)

Through my recordings I met Tom Paxton, who knew Bob Dylan, who had met Woody Guthrie, who had worked with Lead Belly! (I know it's tenuous, but it was a connection that I savored.)

It was late 1993 before I finally made it to the Shiloh Baptist Church near Mooringsport, Louisiana. On a humid autumn day, with leaves falling across the black marble monument, I came home.

I'm glad that Lead Belly's burial place is no longer marked only by a pipe sticking out of the ground. The grave is now a noble memorial to a man who died only thirty months after I was born, but whom I have known for over thirty years.

Lead Belly was a great musician — innovative, vibrant, charismatic — now, and I do know something of the man.

He was a product of his time and circumstances. He was self-centered and mercurial and I have to say that, had I met him, I'm sure that I wouldn't have liked him all that much. I'm equally sure that he wouldn't have liked or trusted me.

But he was an all-time great.

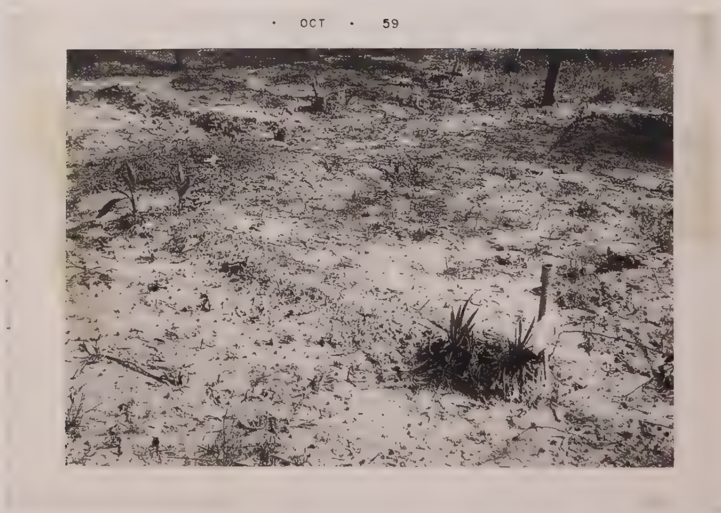


photo by John Reynolds

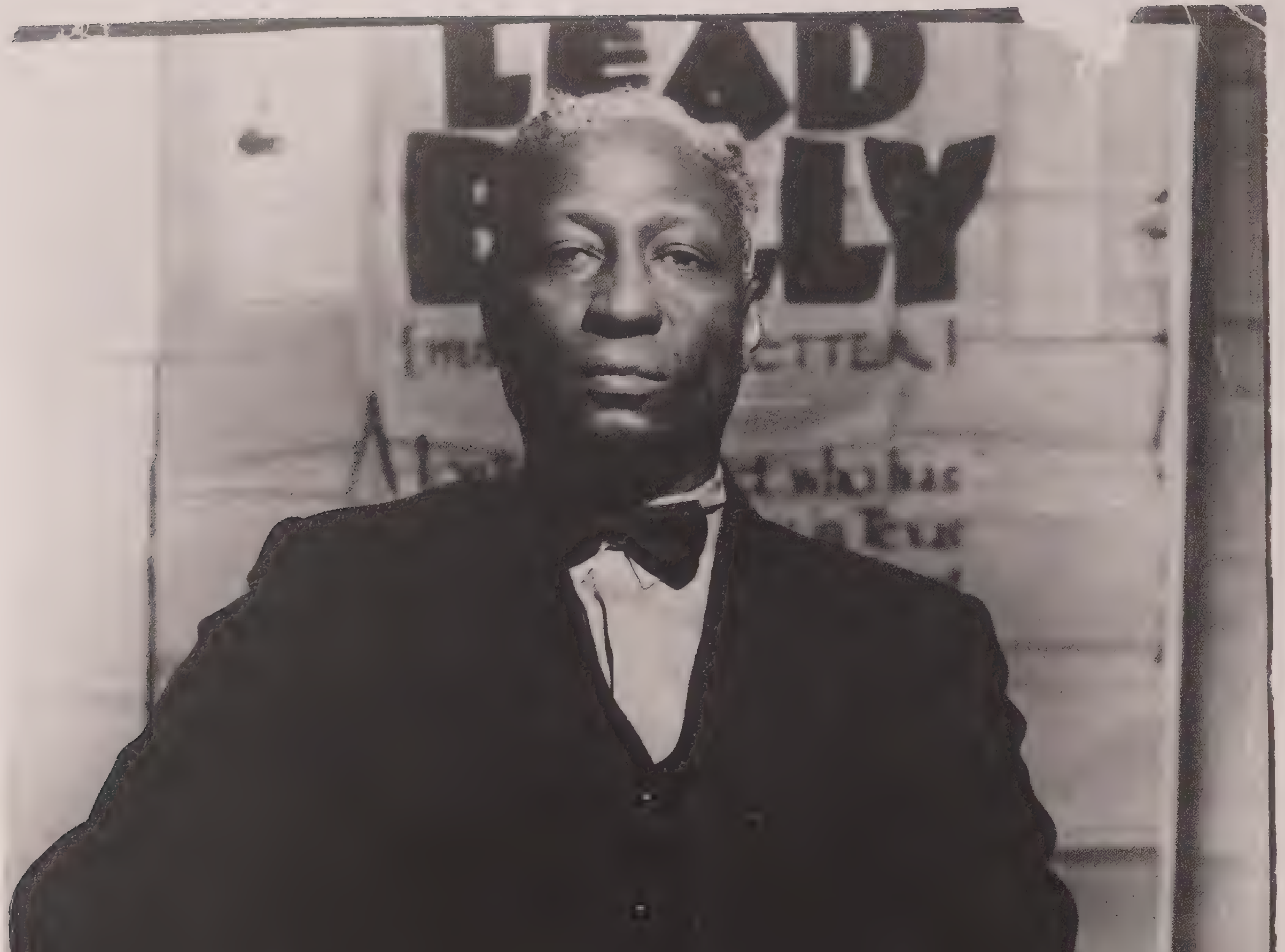


photo by *Van Fisher*

# LEAD BELLY: More Than A Name

> *"Lead was as good a man as you want to meet. He had a big heart, and he was kind. He loved to help people without looking for anything in return."*
>
> **Sonny Terry**

**by Sean Killeen**

Huddie Ledbetter acquired the name Lead Belly as a young man. The name came to symbolize and have meaning for him and others. Originally Lead Belly appeared as two words but in the later stages of Ledbetter's career it has often, but not always, been reduced to one word.

Lead Belly was born Huddie William Ledbetter, the only male child of Wesley and Sallie Pugh Ledbetter. Huddie is a variant of Hugh ("mind, thought"); the name Ledbetter came from England (where a leadbeater was a man who hammered into sheets for roofing) to the Carolinas where Lead Belly's forefathers acquired the name. Just as there have been many spellings of Ledbetter (Leadbetter, Leadbitter, Ledberry, etc.), so also with his acquired nickname (Lead Belly, Ledbelly, Deadbelly, etc.).

The first instance of the name Lead Belly appearing in print, and as two words, is in the correspondence of John A. Lomax, circa 1933–34. With his son, Alan Lomax, they recorded Lead Belly in Angola (LA) Prison in the summers of 1933 and 1934. In the official proceedings of the 1934 Modern Language Association meetings in Philadelphia where Lead Belly performed, they listed his name in the program as one word. Almost all his bombshell press coverage in 1935 spelled Lead Belly as two words. In 1936 Macmillan published the Lomaxes' volume *Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Lead Belly.* In John A. Lomax's last book in 1947, *The Recollections of a Ballad Hunter,* he remained consistent in depicting Lead Belly as two words. The play bill at the Cornell University concert in March 1947 lists Alan Lomax and Lead Belly as coperformers.

With World War II, the name Lead Belly began to appear in contracted form as one word. He was gaining greater popularity through record releases, concert performances and radio broadcasts. With popularity came familiarity; Lead Belly's name was on people's lips, and spoken as one sound it more readily began to be written as one word. Prior to the transition from two words to one in print by the press, there was no such thing as a "leadbelly." Because of Lead Belly's force of personality and success he created the word; he gave life to the word. He created and birthed himself. Lead Belly became a proper noun — Leadbelly.

Ledbetter in prison in Texas acquired a nickname, which was a most common practice, particularly in the Texas prison system as Bruce Jackson has so well described. The name Lead Belly was phonetically similar to Ledbetter; and it was somewhat physically descriptive because Huddie Ledbetter's physique was barrel-chested, short and swarthy, and capable of great strength and endurance. His chest and midsection, particularly when working in the hot sun and probably naked to the waist, as the lead man setting the pace on a work gang, suggested great steel-like strength. Steel or iron or lead are synonymous in this instance as symbolizing endurance and hardiness. So Lead Belly came from what he looked like, how he behaved and the fact that his name, Ledbetter, sounded like Lead Belly.

In 1949 Lead Belly told a fellow Louisianan that Sugarland Prison Chaplin, Rev. "Sin-Killer" Griffin had given him the name. Other explanations of having been shot in the belly, and of great sexual prowess are romantic accounts, and are by no means contradictory. No doubt Huddie Ledbetter got the nickname Lead Belly in Sugarland even though prior to his arrest and all during his time inside and on his formal pardon in 1925 he was officially known as Walter Boyd. This gives us a glimpse at the many identities of Huddie Ledbetter.

Lead Belly never referred to himself as Lead Belly as either two words or one. In his extensive private correspondence he is quite consistent, except for two written instances when he was communicating publicly. Lead Belly was a prolific letter writer, especially in his later years, and when on tour he would write home daily. He would sign his name Huddie Ledbetter, H. Ledbetter and sometimes just H. Led. Or HWL. Many of his friends (particularly Sonny Terry) addressed and spoke of him as Lead (led), which could be spelled as Led or Lead. Lead Belly's family tended to refer to him as Huddie, or sometimes just Ledbetter, which was an intimate and endearing usage, and should not be thought of as formal or reserved.

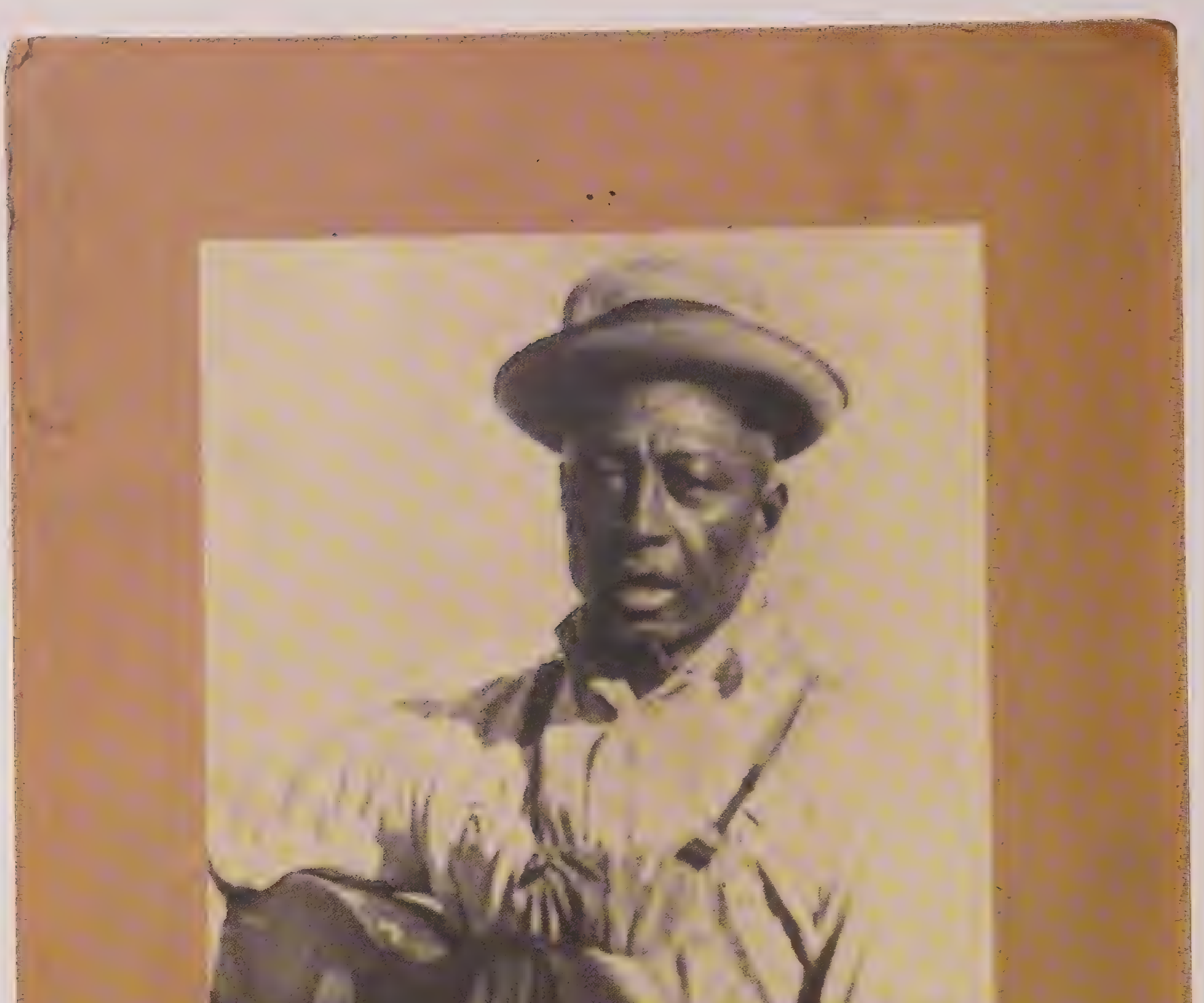
He was Ledbetter. But people came to know of him as Lead Belly. This was his professional name, this was his exterior persona, this was the measure and hallmark of his accomplishments and of his acceptance by society. The world in which he became successful was defined but not limited. Certainly his life would have been more far reaching and extensive had he lived longer. Recognition was around the corner. His songs sold millions of copies starting six months after his death. Three months before his death, he had the first of a European experience, which, had his illness not overtaken him and put him down, would have led to even greater triumphs, particularly in England.

He made himself Lead Belly as the name initially was meant to mean: a person of great endurance and constitution. This is why the Lead Belly Society uses the two word spelling. Similarly Lead Belly's life and his professional career was one of endurance, perseverence and commitment to artistic expression. When he was chided by the chic urban set for not singing modern songs, he replied that he preferred the songs that he knew and had meaning. They were honest and they were part of him. These songs were the messages of reality he was able to share with others.

The two ways of writing Lead Belly, as two words or one, are accurate renditions with different meanings. Lead Belly as two words was the original rendering for the not yet celebrated Huddie Ledbetter. Lead Belly spelled as one word is what he became to many people. It is too simple to say that this is what others made of him, for he refused to allow that to happen. He was always his own man and of his own making. But he would allow others and even encourage people to think and speak of him as Lead Belly. For he was sure of himself and he knew who he was. He was genuinely a self-made man in a unique yet very American mold.

Lead Belly's epitaph which he has left with us:

*If anyone should ask you people, who composed this song,*
*tell them it was Huddie Ledbetter, done been here, and gone!*



[illegible]

## July, 1933: Leadbelly receives Lomax at Angola prison

the ghost of a traveler comes to my cell, carrying machinery of wire and coil, needle stuck into spinning plate of oil. tells me that this machine will stitch my stories into its black tar grooves if i hoist all i know of caddo, fannin street, the .32 and black women's hands, hurl it into song. he wants the aphrodisiac of a hundred thousand slave songs running fevers through my chorus, he wants the secret of cockwalk in the chords.

with two months left in my sentence, i twist the twelve screws that line stella's head so i can howl in double dropped D, the key that lemon always said unlocks the grave's trapdoor and drags the devil up from his harem to shiver between the strings.

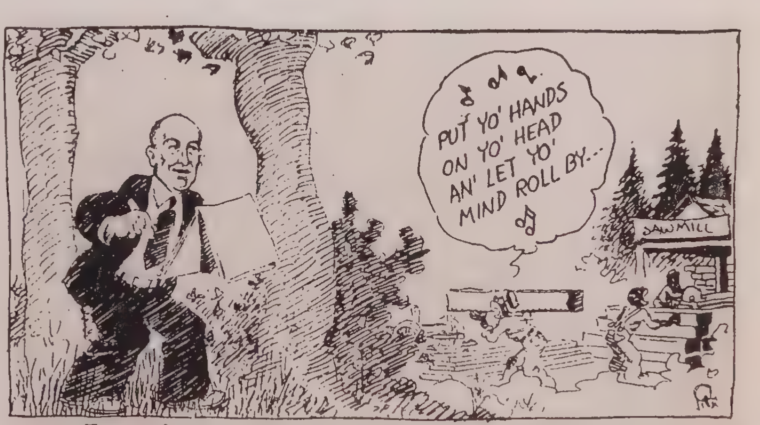
i cram all seven stolen years of clearcut timber in my right hand. swing down on the strings with enough weight to buckle a man beneath knuckle and nightmare, enough to hold a head mouth down deep in baptismal waters till breath is a bludgeoned stranger. downstroke is a shotgun stock shoved hard in a shirker's back, but when my pick hits the chords on the way up, the minor chord flutters up like ravens ghosting across cane fields. my foot obeys rhythm's duty to slice the time i am serving into a metronome of teardrops.

one day, i ran to tell my father of the minstrel toy i craved. the crazed full moon of eye shone over a crescent of watermelon grin, and all it took was a twist in his back to set arms and legs in motion, grinding out a tune from tiny tin banjo in his lap. father searched my face for something he had not known as lost until then. took me out back to our fields and pulled up a palm full of earth:

> *you won't be nobody's slave, long as you have this.*

all the time, our world sifting slow between his fingers.

**Tyehimba Jess**


PUT YO' HANDS ON YO' HEAD AN' LET YO' MIND ROLL BY...
SAWMILL

THE AUTHOR STALKING THE REAL PRODUCT.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

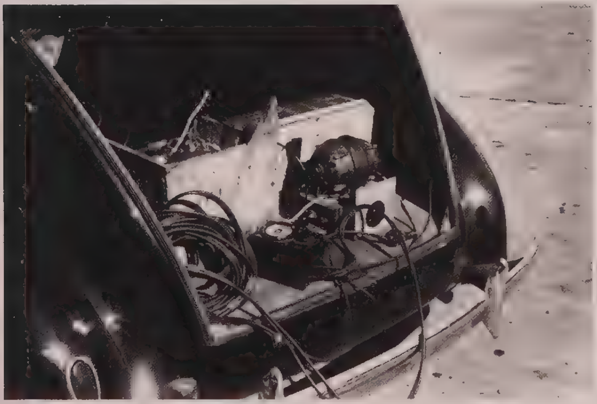
## John Lomax: On seeking song

To free jailed song, you need time's wry locksmith
leaning against the con's tin can safes of sound
until they crack wide open. they've nothing
more than time in prison. worlds of lost chance

stacked over burled heads; anger's thumb bending
caged men double 'til they spill into song.
i drive through those iron gates seeking truth
and step into a living museum,

a whetstone where the slave song just won't stop
sharpening its teeth, carving each chorus
from cell after cell of toiling human
ruin. A dying music's last refuge.

**tyehimba jess**



*John Lomax's recording machine in the trunk of his car, Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

## John Lomax's recording machine, 1933

350 lbs. of metal mockingbird,
hostage in the hold of a beat up ford,
i jerk across time's dark ocean of heat
until the trunk's starless sky flies up
and gospel white hands
lift my microphone tongue
to brown faces blistered
with the weight of song.

a hempstead woman
gently peels the sugar of her lover's kiss
from the salt of his last good-bye,
spoon feeds me her homemade tonic of loss
in the honeyed space between a cappella breaths.

a galveston guitar man breaks open
the battered wooden box in his throat,
spits a broken farmer's boll weevil fury
between my vacuum tube teeth.

a procession of paupers,
royal only in their mud
colored castles of skin,
ladles hand-me-down stories
down my copper wire throat.
each one scratches a tune from their lungs
for me to sculpt into the black world of groove
twisting galactic, slow, beneath
my shuddering diamond nerve.

**Tyehimba Jess**

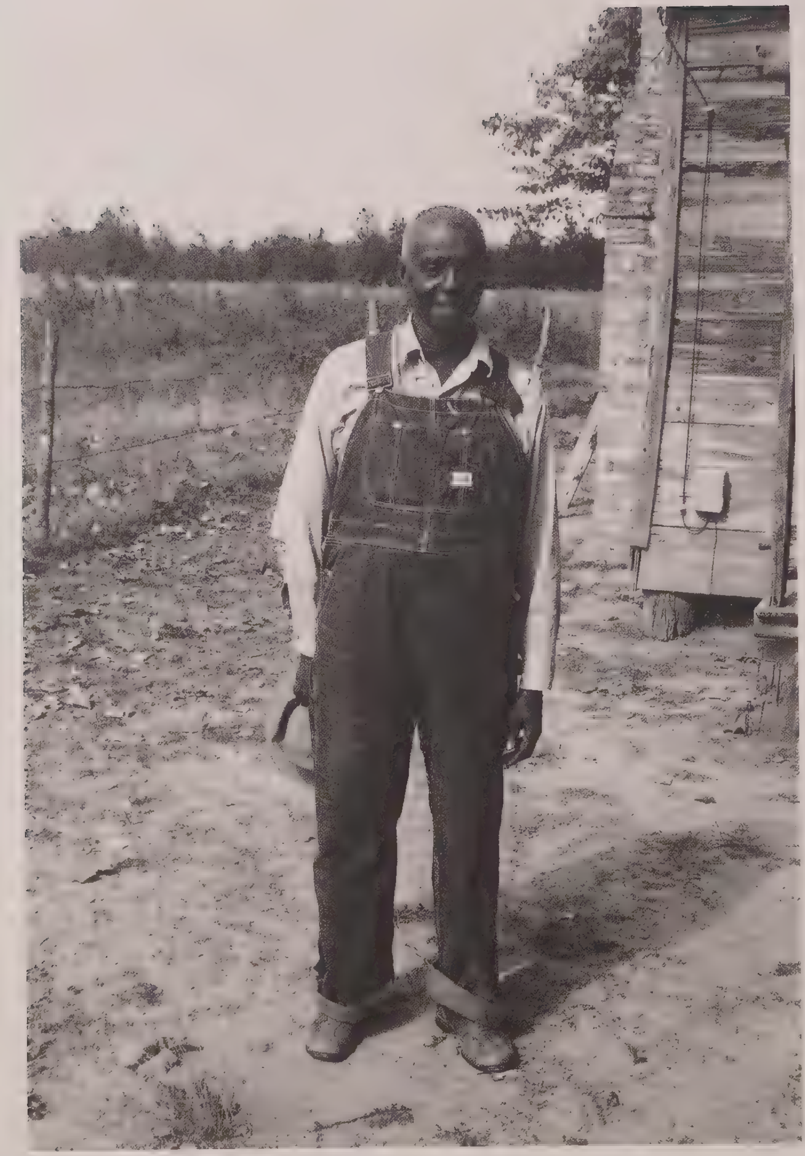


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*photo by John Reynolds*

# COUSIN EDMON

*"If you want to hear true, honest music with passion, then you should hear Lead Belly. The songs are just amazingly heartfelt."*
**William Burroughs**

**by John Reynolds**

In the summer of 1955, while hitchhiking to New York from California prior to joining the Navy, I detoured through Louisiana, stopping off in Shreveport in search of Lead Belly's grave. I had been given the names of Lead Belly's kin by his widow, Martha, whom I had gotten to know in New York. I telephoned Martha's twin sister Mary, whom Lead Belly had described as "them twin sisters out of the Bible," and she told me how to get out to Mooringsport.

After a long bus ride that wove through bleak, black neighborhoods, I found myself deep in red clay country surrounded by towering pines. I got off at the Esso station near Longwood crossroads where I met Lead Belly's first cousin, Edmon Ledbetter, a kind-faced man about Lead Belly's size, wearing neat bib overalls and a wide brimmed hat to ward off the mid-day Louisiana sun. He greeted me warmly, saying "I know you came a long way so I want to help," and he proceeded to lead me down a narrow path into a clearing that was the front yard of his rustic house. The broom by the front door with a sleeping cat to one side had obviously served duty that afternoon as the yard was spotless.

Edmon's face light up as he began to speak of his cousin. "Huddie and me were like brothers. We went everywhere together. He would come over to my house after school and we would play in the yard. He liked the horseshoes and was the best player around. He could shoot a good ringer" said Edmon excitedly as he swooped down on his right knee making a loping gesture with his right hand to demonstrate Lead Belly's pitching technique. "That boy could never sit still; he always had to be doing something." Edmon recalled Huddie seldom objected to working in the fields; the work had to get done and he was the only son. Lead Belly once said, "My mamma and papa was too fine for me." Edmon remembered the pony Huddie's doting parents gave him, and how he liked to show off riding around the countryside. He had a saddle but also rode bareback since it presented more of a challenge — and Lead Belly liked to challenge himself.

Edmon shared many memories of their boyhood: "Huddie would come over and spend the night with us. He used to play the accordion and then I taught him to play the six-string guitar. He was a quick learner. He was the onliest somebody I knew who could just pick up an instrument and play it like he had lessons. He done had trouble with some of the songs I played so I just showed him. He would sit by the fireplace and keep trying until he got it right. We each had our own songs and would write them down so people in our family could sing them too. Those were happy times."

Soon Edmon and Huddie were called on to play at house parties and sukey jumps in the area. Edmon thought the music sounded better in the quiet night. Huddie thought otherwise. He liked the weekend excitement of being in town and all the glitter that went with it. "The women were crazy about him. He liked all that attention." I asked if Huddie had a bad temper. "Oh, he had a quick temper alright, but if you didn't make him angry he wouldn't bother you. He

NEGRO SINFUL SONGS
sung by
LEAD BELLY

was very kindly with my family, especially the children. He had such a sweet smile. He even smiled when he was angry. Sometimes you couldn't tell."

Edmon clearly recalled that he and Lead Belly had spent the night together before he headed up to New York with John Lomax in the fall of 1934. Huddie had written him regularly from up North, Edmon said as he showed me a neatly folded but now yellowed letter. The boldly graphic stationery proclaimed "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands" and "Huddie Ledbetter in Southern Melodies" in red and black type. Also the photo images of Lead Belly, one showing the singer clad in overalls sitting atop a bale of hay, the other nattily decked out in bowler hat, bow tie, tails and sporting a white cane, were captioned, "Only act featuring gun tap dancing." The fourteen-year-old letter was dated Nov. 6, 1941. There was no signature which was typical of Lead Belly's correspondence.

"Dear Edmon Ledbetter, How are you this time? I hope you are well and Alice and the kids. How are them two boys? Tell them I say hello. You be sho' to take care of them boys. They are onefull. I have been sick in the hospital but I am up and doing fine. Hope you are all fine." [Perhaps feeling guilty about not sending an old suit as promised in an earlier letter, Lead Belly continued] "I didn't send that suit because it would have been too large for you. Here is some pitchers from a party the peoples gave for me las' Sunday [enclosing recent newspaper clippings about a Café Society benefit Woody Guthrie, Josh White and Burl Ives had given after Lead Belly's recent bout with pneumonia]. Huddie's closing was brief. "Write me. Until I hear from you. So long."

Edmon and I went over to the Shiloh Baptist Church where Huddie was buried. One corner of the cemetery is dominated by a majestic magnolia tree towering over a dense cluster of graves. To be buried close to the tree of life would be far more important to African ways of thinking than to be laid out in right angles, on a grid. A piece of iron pipe jutting up from a barren plot marked Lead Belly's grave. I was astonished there was no stone. Looking around I noticed simple headstones dotting the incredibly peaceful setting as well as odd rows of light bulbs that had been pressed into the red soil. I later learned this practice dates back to the West African custom of placing lamps atop graves to light the way to the after life.

Walking away I glanced back and saw the path of light shining the way to Huddie's final resting place. The challenge of Lead Belly's journey was complete.

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## Martha promise receives Leadbelly, 1935

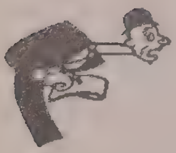
when your man comes home from prison,
when he comes back like the wound
and you are the stitch,
when he comes back with pennies in his pocket
and prayer fresh on his lips,
you got to wash him down first.

you got to have the wildweed and treebark boiled
and calmed, waiting for his skin like a shining baptism
back into what he was before gun barrels and bars
chewed their claim in his hide and spit him
stumbling backwards into screaming sunlight.

you got to scrub loose the jailtime fingersmears
from ashy skin, lather down the cuffmarks
from ankle and wrist, rinse solitary's stench loose
from his hair, crape curse and confession
from the welted and the smooth,
the hard and the soft,
the furrowed and the lax.

you got to hold tight that shadrach's face
between your palms, take crease and lid
and lip and brow and rinse slow with river water,
and when he opens his eyes
you tell him calm and sure
how a woman birthed him
back whole again.

**Tyehimba Jess**



# BALLAD OF A BALLAD-SINGER

LOMAX ARRIVES WITH LEAD BELLY, NEGRO MINSTREL—*Headline in Herald Tribune*

John Lomax searched for folk song
Under Southern boughs,
'Mong the pickers in the cotton fields
And the singers in the barrel house,
And road gangs heaving hammers high
To a work song with a golden cry.

Down in Louisiana
The convicts sing long.
Though prison walls are high and gray
Their halls are stored with song.
Such wealth John Lomax found at last
Where shackled Negroes shuffled past.

In a cell at Angola,
Marked by stripe and bar,
There sat the self-acknowledged king
Of the twelve-string guitar,
And he could sing as long as you please
To charm the birds right out of the trees.

He was big and he was black
And wondrous were his wrongs,
But he had a memory travelled back
Through at least five hundred songs.
When his fingers gave those strings a twang
Like a very god in heaven he sang.

He sat there in his stripèd suit,
He sang like Kingdom Come.
At the end of day, when his voice was mute,
John Lomax sat dumb,
Then wrung his hand without a word
For the marvellous ballads he had heard.

And Lead Belly said to Lomax,
"I have written a song
For a pardon from the Governor,
Since my sentence is long;
As I sang to Governor Neff of late
When he pardoned me from Texas State.

"An' if so be I might request—
Put that song on a roll,
An' let the Governor hear it
So he may save my soul!"
And they made a record of his petition
And pardoned him on that condition.

And Lead Belly came to Lomax
In the fall, as it befell,
When he was sitting in the lobby
Of a Texas hotel.
With knife, guitar, and sugar bag packed,
Lead Belly stood there, for a fact.

And all the words that he did say
Were: "Boss, here I is."
So Lomax took him to his room
And there began to quiz,
But Lead Belly vowed, as he began,
"Boss, I came to be your man!

"Boss, I killed, without my fault,
For it was an attack.
They jumped me, and I tell you, Boss,
I had to fight back."
Said Lomax, "So? Well, here you are,
And I need a driver for my car.

"But if some day on a lonely road
That knife of yours gets free—!"
"Oh, don' talk that way, Boss,
Don' talk that way to me!
If anyone tries to do you dirt,
I'll take the bullet before you's hurt!"

Lead Belly drives the Lomax car
And he is never tired;
He's a better man, John Lomax vows,
Than any he ever hired.
He sings at prisons to convict throngs
And helps John Lomax gather songs.

And soon enough up to Yankeeland
The Lomax car is whirled,
And Yale and Harvard hear "the famousest
Guitar-player in the world!"
And Lead Belly's own songs they heed,
Like one of "Bill Martin and Ella Speed."

Just as folk gather Southern grapes,
Muscadines, scuppernongs—
So, for the Carnegie Corporation,
John Lomax gathered songs;
But in swampland Lead Belly he can scan
A whole book of ballads all in one man!

So here's to John A. Lomax
And to Orpheus his peer,
With a voice that makes brown ladies swoon,
And a scar from ear to ear;
And, I hope for Lead Belly's sake, a charm
That will protect him from all harm!

For once in an age a minstrel
Like Lead Belly doth arise,
And then it's good to hear him singing
The stars right out of the skies
With his own "Bill Martin—long and slender—
Better known by bein' a bartender!"

—William Rose Benét

# LEAD BELLY TAKES MANHATTAN

*"Aint It a Pity I'm in New York City."*

## Lomax Arrives With Lead Belly, Negro Minstrel

John A. Lomax, tireless student and compiler of American folk-songs, has arrived in New York with his son, dozens of records made by them for the Library of Congress on a year's tour through the prisons and plantations of the South, and a walking, singing, fighting album of Negro ballads named Lead Belly, self-acknowledged king of the twelve-string guitar.

Lead Belly, born Huddie Ledbetter, of the Louisiana swamps, is a powerful, knife-toting Negro, who has killed one man and seriously wounded another, but whose husky tenor, and feathery, string-plucking fingers ineluctably charm the ears of those who listen. Twice has Lead Belly sung for the governors of Southern states, and twice has he been pardoned by them from serving long terms in state penitentiaries.

The "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands" was sleeping off the effects of his first trip to Harlem yesterday when a visitor called on Mr. Lomax and his son, Alan, at the home of a friend at 181 Sullivan Street. Mr. Lomax apologized and said that Lead Belly would sing at a luncheon of alumni of the University of Texas at the Hotel Montclair at tomorrow noon.

## "Big Boss" and "Little Boss"

To Lead Belly, Mr. Lomax, whose massive book, "American Ballads and Folk-songs", was published by the Macmillan Company two months ago, is "Big Boss". His son and collaborator is "Little Boss". For those two the Negro minstrel bears an undying affection which led him on September 1 to pledge to them for life and services till death shall part them. He has followed them everywhere as chauffeur, handyman and ever-ready musician and has asked for nothing but the privilege so to continue.

All of this has proved at times a little embarrassing for Big Boss and Little Boss, as Lead Belly's voice causes brown-skinned women to swoon and produces a violently inverse effect upon their husbands and lovers. A large scar which spans his neck from ear to ear bears witness to his dreadful charm and a knife that was fortuitously dull. Big Boss fears that in Harlem something catastrophic may happen when Lead Belly starts to sing.

Mr. Lomax was very much relieved when his faithful retainer returned unscathed yesterday from his first expedition to the metropolitan black belt. Lead Belly claimed that Cab Calloway was bidding for his services, even as agents and band leaders in Philadelphia had done when he had sung there a few nights ago. For the famous orchestra leader and scat-singer himself, however, Lead Belly expressed the greatest contempt.

"I can beat Cab Calloway singin' every time," Lead Belly told Big Boss and Little Boss, shedding a prodigious tear. "He don' know nothin' 'bout singin.'" Lead Belly is scheduled to sing next week at Yale and Harvard where Mr. Lomax is to lecture on his work. Mr. Lomax does not quite know what to do with him after that. Lead Belly, he explained, was a "natural", who had no idea of money, law or ethics and who possessed of virtually no self-restraint. He is tremendously pleased with himself, and when Mr.

< *Originally published in The New Yorker. Used with permission/James W. Benet*

Lomax told him before an appearance at Bryn Mawr a few days ago that he was about to sing at one of the most famous girl's colleges in the country, Lead Belly replied, "Well, do they know they're going to hear the most famous guitar player in the world?"

Mr. Lomax has included several of Lead Belly's original compositions in his book, "American Ballads and Folk Songs".

### Songs Win Cash And Stage Bids For Lead Belly

Lead Belly, swamp singer whose voice and guitar opened for him the gates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary a few months ago, made his first public appearance in New York yesterday afternoon before a group of enthusiastic University of Texas alumni at a luncheon in the Hotel Montclair, Lexington Avenue and Forty-ninth Street. Two hours after the meal was over they still lingered, draining his repertoire of Negro ballads, work songs and reels and filling his ears with applause and his battered hat with jingling coins.

Under the aegis of John A. Lomax, authority on American folk songs, Lead Belly came to New York a few days ago to sing before selected groups of people who were interested in Mr. Lomax's work. Within a few hours of his arrival his fame had traveled far and wide and yesterday at the luncheon theatrical agents and vaudeville impresarios and radio company representatives streamed in armed with a variety of prepared contracts and tempting offers. Lead Belly's day was climaxed by an audition at the N.B.C. studios in Rockefeller Center.

All of this worried Mr. Lomax exceedingly and he was forced to divide his efforts between speaking to his fellow Texans and shielding his musical murderous protégé from the world of commerce. He was quite willing that Lead Belly's talents should receive proper recognition from the proper persons but, as he explained it, "if anybody waved a $10 bill at Lead Belly he'd follow him out the door." His chief fear was that the quick tempered, knife-toting Negro would get loose in Harlem and win for himself another such scar as that which now girdles his neck from ear to ear.

### Sings "Freedom" Song

Yesterday Lead Belly sang as the pièce de résistance of his recital his original composition appealing to Pat Neff, former Governor of Texas, for a pardon from a forty-year sentence for murder. This pardon the Governor granted after hearing Lead Belly's song, which is here reproduced for the first time.

*"In nineteen hundred and twenty-three*
*when the jury took my liberty away from me,*
*I left my wife wringin' her hands and cryin'*
*Sayin' 'Lord have mercy on de man o' mine.'*
*I tol' my wife befo' I left de lan'*
*If I never no mo' see her, do the best she can.*
*Goodbye Mary, goodbye Mary — po' Mary — po' Mary.*
*I am your servant composed this song;*
*Please, Governor Neff, let me go back home.*
*I know my wife will jump and shout*
*When de train roll up and I come steppin' out.*
*Please, Governor Neff, be good an' kind,*
*Have mercy on my great long time.*
*I don't see to save my soul:*
*If I can't get a pardon, try me in a parole.*
*Goin' home to Mary — po' Mary.*
*Some folks say it's a sin.*
*You got too many women and too many men.*
*Please Governor Neff, be good and kind.*
*And if I can't get a pardon, will you cut my time?*

*If I had you, Governor Neff like you got me,*
*I would wake up in the mornin' and set you free.*
*And I'm goin' home to Mary — po' Mary"*

The tune of this composition is sprightly and infectious, and as Lead Belly sang it he tapped his left foot in single time and his right foot in doubled and triple beats.

"If you don't think that's hard," Mr Lomax pointed out, "try it yourself."

It was only six years after the above song had won Lead Belly's pardon from a Texas state prison that he found himself serving a ten-year term in Louisiana.

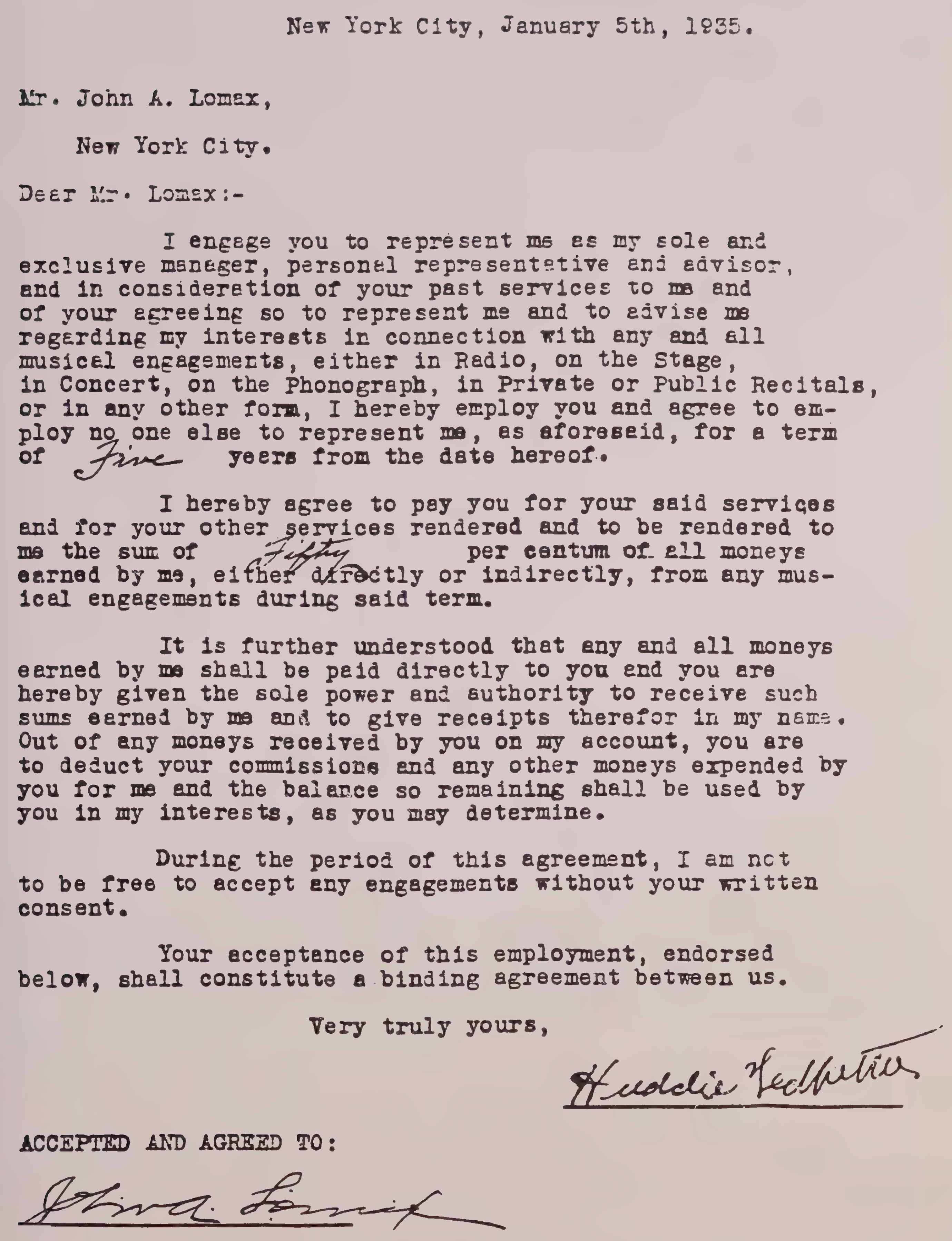
### Won Second Pardon

Continuing his work of making talking machine records of the unwritten Negro ballads of the South for the Library of Congress, Mr. Lomax prepared a record of Lead Belly's plea and presented it to the Governor of Louisiana. The singer was pardoned August 1, and since then, everlastingly grateful, he has not left Mr. Lomax's side.

"Northern people," Mr. Lomax explained to the Texans, "hear Negroes playing and singing beautiful spirituals which are too refined and are unlike the true Southern spirituals. Or else they hear men and women on the stage and radio, burlesquing their own songs. Lead Belly doesn't burlesque. He plays and sings with absolute sincerity. Whether or not it sounds foolish to you, he plays with absolute sincerity. I've heard his songs a hundred times, but I always get a thrill. To me his music is real music."

Among the folk songs Lead Belly sang were "Bring Me a Little Water, Sylvie," "I'm All Down and Out," "Whoa, Back, Buck," "Irene," and "Take a Whiff on Me," a song about sharing cocaine.

A representative of the Century Play Company, of 1440 Broadway, who appeared at the luncheon armed with a five year contract for Lead Belly, said that before he could make professional appearances the Negro would require lessons in voice and elocution. Mr. Lomax gave him an option until Monday.



New York City, January 5th, 1935.

Mr. John A. Lomax,

New York City.

Dear Mr. Lomax:-

I engage you to represent me as my sole and exclusive manager, personal representative and advisor, and in consideration of your past services to me and of your agreeing so to represent me and to advise me regarding my interests in connection with any and all musical engagements, either in Radio, on the Stage, in Concert, on the Phonograph, in Private or Public Recitals, or in any other form, I hereby employ you and agree to employ no one else to represent me, as aforesaid, for a term of Five years from the date hereof.

I hereby agree to pay you for your said services and for your other services rendered and to be rendered to me the sum of Fifty per centum of all moneys earned by me, either directly or indirectly, from any musical engagements during said term.

It is further understood that any and all moneys earned by me shall be paid directly to you and you are hereby given the sole power and authority to receive such sums earned by me and to give receipts therefor in my name. Out of any moneys received by you on my account, you are to deduct your commissions and any other moneys expended by you for me and the balance so remaining shall be used by you in my interests, as you may determine.

During the period of this agreement, I am not to be free to accept any engagements without your written consent.

Your acceptance of this employment, endorsed below, shall constitute a binding agreement between us.

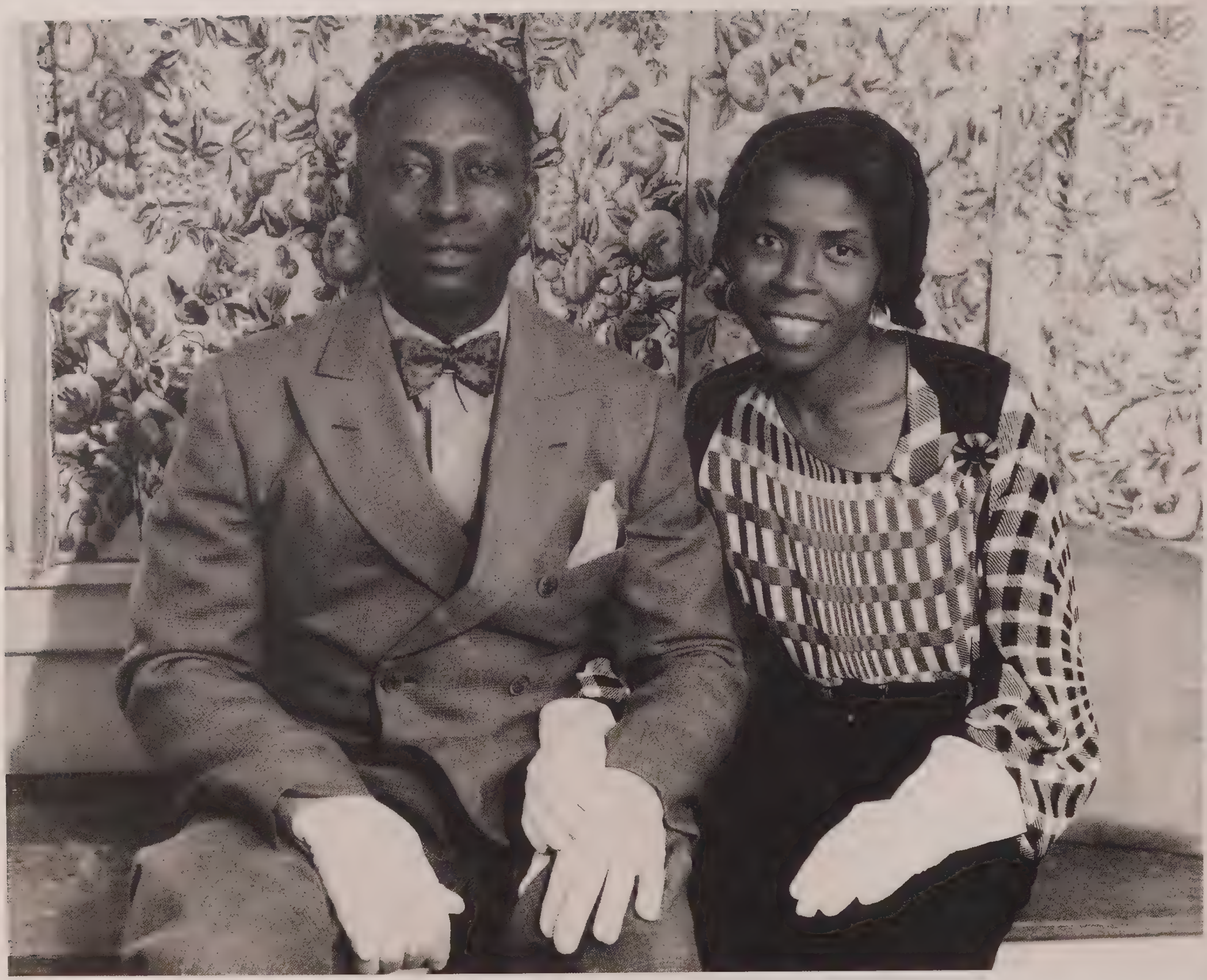
Very truly yours,

Huddie Ledbetter

ACCEPTED AND AGREED TO:

John A. Lomax

*Lead Belly's infamous contract with John Lomax*



Mr. and Mrs. Huddie Ledbetter

### Lead Belly Puts Songs Aside to Wed Tomorrow

Lead Belly, the jet-black Negro guitar player who sang his way from a long sentence in the Louisiana state prison to the spotlight in New York City, is to be married tomorrow. The bride will be Martha Promise, of Shreveport, La., according to John A. Lomax, author and compiler of American folk songs, under whose aegis Lead Belly's talents have been displayed.

For years Lead Belly has been in love with Miss Promise, but his extra-legal exploits with knife and fists invariably precluded wedlock. Now, however, the saturnine singer of the swamplands seems about to make his mark in a lawful calling, as a musician, and Mr. Lomax, therefore, announced yesterday that he had telegraphed the Shreveport laundress to proceed to New York and consumate her protracted romance.

### You see, He's Sold His Memoirs

This move was occasioned by a contract from the Macmillan Company, publishers of Mr. Lomax's massive anthology, "American Ballads and Folk Songs," for an account of Lead Belly's turbulent life. Mr. Lomax and his son, Alan, are retiring to a house in Wilton, Conn., to help their knife-bearing, melodious retainer write his memoirs. Feeling that they could use a female servant and that Lead Belly might be more tractable under the influence of a wife, they arranged for Martha's transportation to the North.

Yesterday afternoon when Mr. Lomax informed his faithful follower that he was about to become a husband Lead Belly cried in delight: "Blessed Jesus, massa, massa, my boss; I'se de happiest nigger in de whole world."

He then proceeded to augment Mr. Lomax's detailed telegram of instructions with two others. One of them said:

"When you will start? Boss (Mr. Lomax) and Little Boss (Alan) and I will meet you at the train and take you to our home, where you and I will cook and keep house for them. I want to marry you at once, as you are my intended wife.

Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly's real name) your husband."

The second telegram read:

"Hurry up we are all waiting for you don't be frightened I'll be at the train steps waiting to kiss you just as soon as you arrive in New York."

In the last week Lead Belly has been deluged with contracts for radio and vaudeville appearances. Of these, the only one Mr. Lomax has accepted for him at present is an engagement to appear on the "March of Time" radio program tomorrow night.

Of the imminent Mrs. Lead Belly Mr. Lomax said: "Martha Promise is an intelligent, sweet-faced Negro woman with some education and an admirable character. She is not a kept woman, but rather a woman who has been keeping a man. When Lead Belly…????

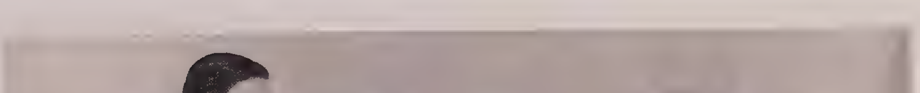
### Lead Belly Gets A Bad Scare as Fiancee Rolls In

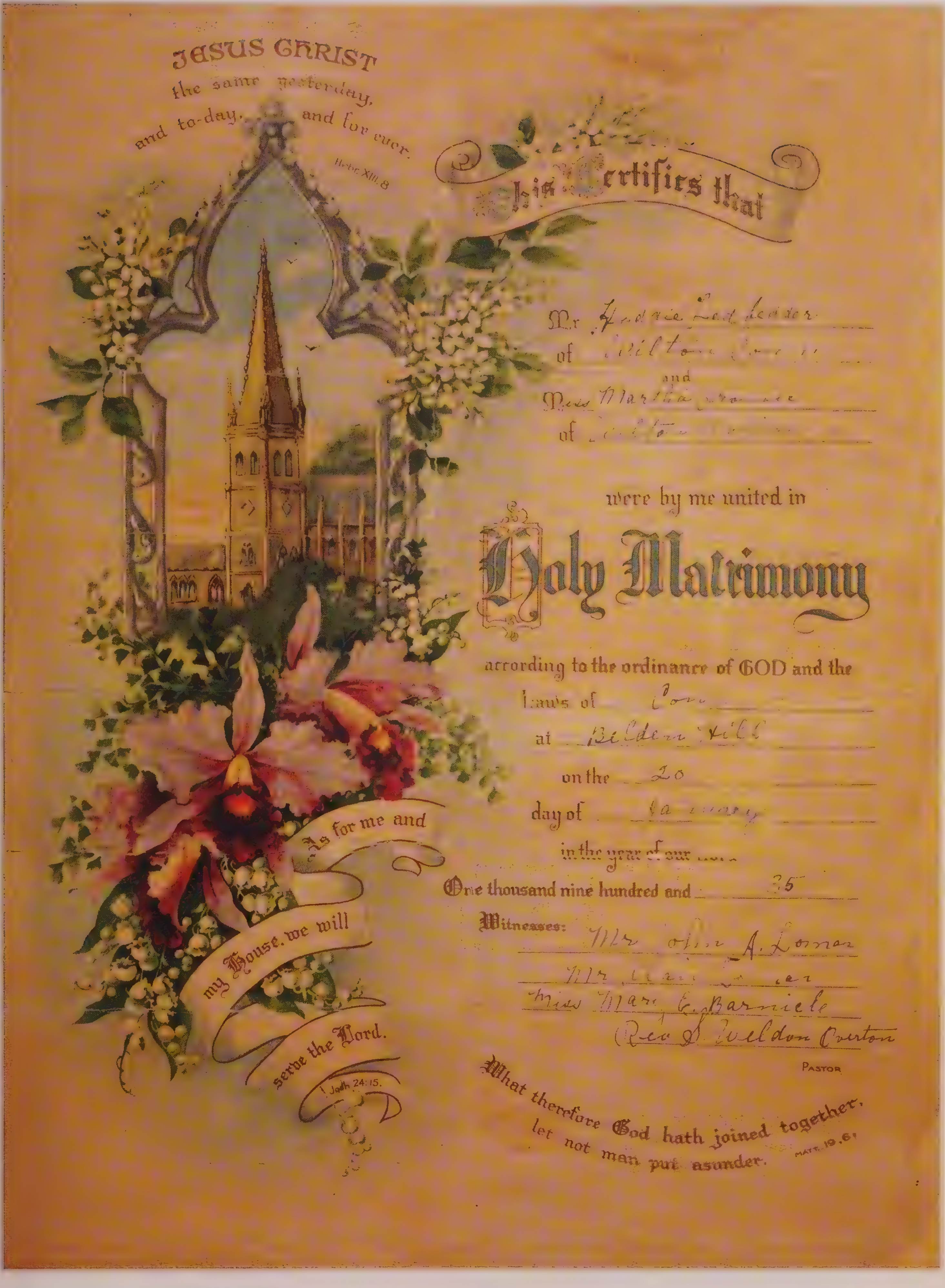
A comedy of errors, well wrought in accordance with the Aristotelian unities and infused with all the dramatic elements of love, hope, fear, despair and ultimate jubilation, was enacted at Pennsylvania Station yesterday in the forty-five minutes between noon and 12:45 p. m.

The hero is the Negro minstrel, Lead Belly, erstwhile slayer, equally adept with knife of guitar, born in the Louisiana swamplands, now tasting for the first time the sweet fruits of musical success as they drop from the richly laden branches of radio and stage. He has come to Pennsylvania Station, resplendent in a double-breasted tan suit with red pin stripes, tan shirt with red tie, tan shoes agleam, and a white silk scarf, to meet the heroine, his old sweetheart, Martha Promise, of Shreveport, La., who in the past has sheltered him when he was hungry and broke between prison sentences.

With Lead Belly, as the play begins, is his master and amanuensis, John A. Lomax, author and authority on American ballads and folk songs, in whose hands the strings of action lie. It was Mr. Lomax who, while recording Negro music for the Library of Congress, discovered Lead Belly and helped to obtain for him a pardon. Now he has decided to take the dark-skinned troubador into his household as personal servant and chauffeur and he has sent for Martha that she may cook for him and incidentally bind in wedlock her romance with the acknowledged king of the twelve-string guitar.

Martha's train is due at 12:05 p. m. At 12:04 Mr. Lomax and Lead Belly are waiting upon Track No. 8. Mr. Lomax chews his cigar expectantly. Lead Belly nervously paces the platform. In the background is a Greek chorus of newspaper reporters, photographers and interested redcaps who have discovered that the jaunty, restless platform-pacer is a distinguished member of their race.





JESUS CHRIST
the same yesterday,
and to-day, and for ever.
Hebr. XIII. 8

This Certifies that

Mr Hedric Ledbeater
of Wilton Conn.
and
Miss Martha [illegible]
of Wilton [illegible]

were by me united in

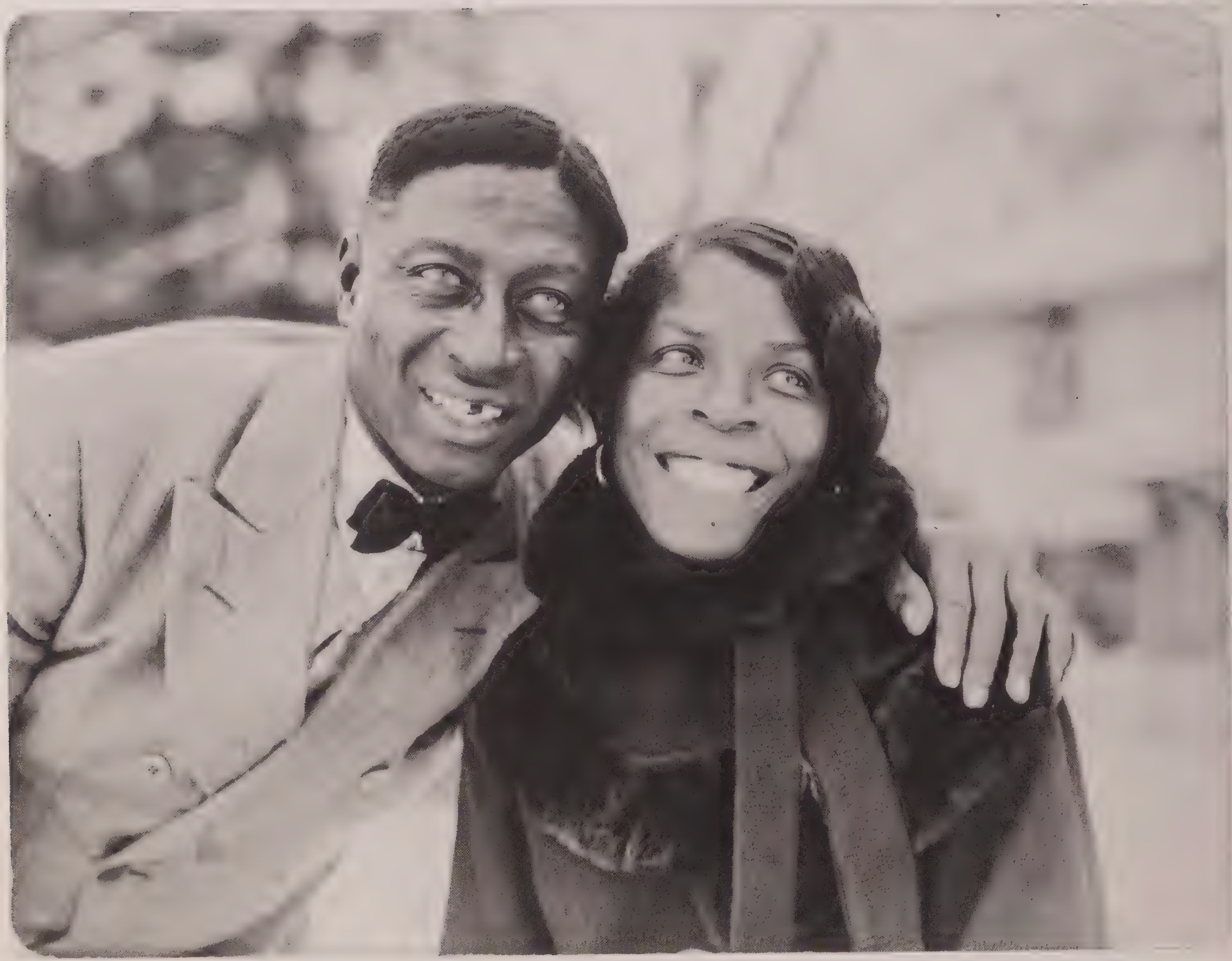
# Holy Matrimony

according to the ordinance of GOD and the
Laws of Conn
at Belden Hill
on the 20
day of January
in the year of our Lord
One thousand nine hundred and 35

**Witnesses:** Mr Olin A. Lomar
Mr [illegible]
Miss Mary E. Barnicle
Rev S. Weldon Overton
PASTOR

As for me and my House, we will serve the Lord.
Josh 24:15.

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.
MATT. 19.6.



*Larry Cohn once asked Martha about Lead Belly's black hair in this 1937 photo. She explained that since there was a twenty year difference between Huddie and herself, he had blackened it with shoe polish in an effort to look younger.*
*photo courtesy of the Library of Congress*

## Leadbelly & Martha: Return to New York, 1936

i'll unload the trunk, air out the best suit

*i empty the bags, hang our jackets loose*

up on the closet rod. the sound is past,

*as shreveport shakes out of our boots and hats*

and so we sweep our small room one more time,

*to make room for the light of neon signs*

wiping walls with hard new harlem shadows

*that flicker in the stoplight's red/green glow.*

guitar filled palms and washerwomen hands

*good luck, steady work—all we got that can*

hold back a landlord's eviction note—

*keep us fed on brittle scraps of hope—*

that's all we need. 'leastwise for tonight.

*a clean stat, a place to make things right.*

**Tyehimba Jess**

## I'm in New York City

"Ain't it a pity,
I'm in New York City."

It was Lead Belly singing — the rhyming, knife-toting, string-plucking, toe-tapping Negro minstrel from the Louisiana swamplands — self-acknowledged King of the Twelve-String Guitar. Twice his skill with sharp steel weapons has landed him in prison for homicide; twice his enchanting barytone has bewitched the Governors of Southern states into granting him pardons. And yesterday Lead Belly was back in this city, chanting:

"When it 'gin to 'pear cloudy
An' a-lookin' like rain,
You step downstairs
An' ride a subway train.
Now ain't it a pity
I'm in New York City."

A year ago, when Lead Belly first arose darkly shining on New York's musical horizon, his public appearances were rigidly restricted by his mentor and chaperone, Dr. John A. Lomax, anthologist of American Folksongs and ballads. It was Dr. Lomax who had found Lead Belly in the Louisiana State Prison, who discovered that he was a walking anthology of unwritten music, and who brought him North as a sort of musico-ethnological curiosity.

Then their ways parted. Dr. Lomax returned to his home in Austin, Texas, and Lead Belly to his home in Shreveport, Louisiana, after which,

"For a couple o' months I got nothin' done
But eatin', sleepin' and stayin' in the sun.
Jes' did nothin' but take my income."

Now Lead Belly has come back to the scene of his limited triumph, prepared this time to sing his way to glory. His new manager, until he met Lead Belly, was a filling station proprietor in Dallas, Texas. Last Thanksgiving Day the King of the Twelve-String Guitar had applied for a job greasing and washing cars, asking a wage of ten cents a day. The filling station owner, a young man named John W. Townsend, promptly put Lead Belly to work. Then when he learned the identity of his new helper he sold his business, rented his house and, bundling his mother and Lead Belly and his wife, Martha, into his car, hastened up to New York to sell the apples which had dropped in his lap.

"Oh, I walked up to Dallas town,
The sky was blue an' the road was brown,
No one give me nothin', now I got nothin' to give.
Shreveport's my ol' home, but Dallas here I live.
So I'm in New York City
And I'll tell anybody what I like for 'em to do
Is catch a bus and ride up Fifth Avenue.
I'm still in New York City.
Ain't it a pity
I'm in New York City?"

*"Lead Belly loved New York. He felt free to move about and not have to worry about someone's questioning him or a sheriff chasing him. He had enough of that, and he was very careful."*

**Tiny Robinson**

Lead Belly exudes song as easily as he absorbs gin. His new master has simply to keep the guitar-king away from the bottle and close to his strings to inspire melody. Rhymes fall from his lips in the course of ordinary conversation in disconcerting profusion. Thus, when asked by an interviewer whether he was glad to be back in New York, Lead Belly merely added another verse to his rapidly growing ballad which he calls "Aint It a Pity I'm in New York City." He crooned:

"Yes, sir — too glad — it's heaven to me,
The bigges' city I ever did see.
Down in the South everybody tell
New York City is a burnin' hell.
So, ain't it a pity
I'm in New York City,
Because it's heaven for me."

Lead Belly was asked next about his wife, the former Miss Martha Promise, a Shreveport laundress, who now bears his name as Mrs. Huddie Ledbetter. ("Lead Belly" is a corruption of "Ledbetter.") At mention of Martha's name, Lead Belly flashed white teeth and pretended to seize a telephone, singing:

"Hello Central, give me long distance phone.
I want to talk with my baby the whole night long,
Tell her 'bout the trouble and the trials that I've had —
She tol' me that all wasn't so bad.
So, hello Central, give me two-naught-nine,
I want to talk to that gal o' mine."

Asked whether he minded the cold weather in New York, Lead Belly replied:

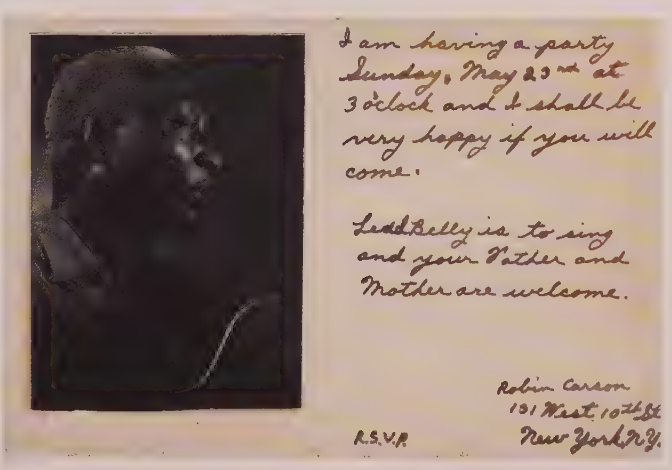
"I ride aroun' lookin' at the snow and ice,
An' if anybody wants to take my advice,
They'll keep away from this snow and ice."

He paused a moment, reflecting, then added, a little weakly:

"They say this ain't the wors' you ever had,
An' I'm so glad.
'Cause it mus' have been too bad."

On this trip Lead Belly did not bring his faithful old adhesive-taped guitar with which he sang his way out of prison. Instead, he has a shiny new one, made in Brooklyn, of which he says:

"This guee-tar don' make no errors,
It makes all runs without no errors.
Guee-tar, when you get back South.
You're goin' have to be as quiet as a mouse."



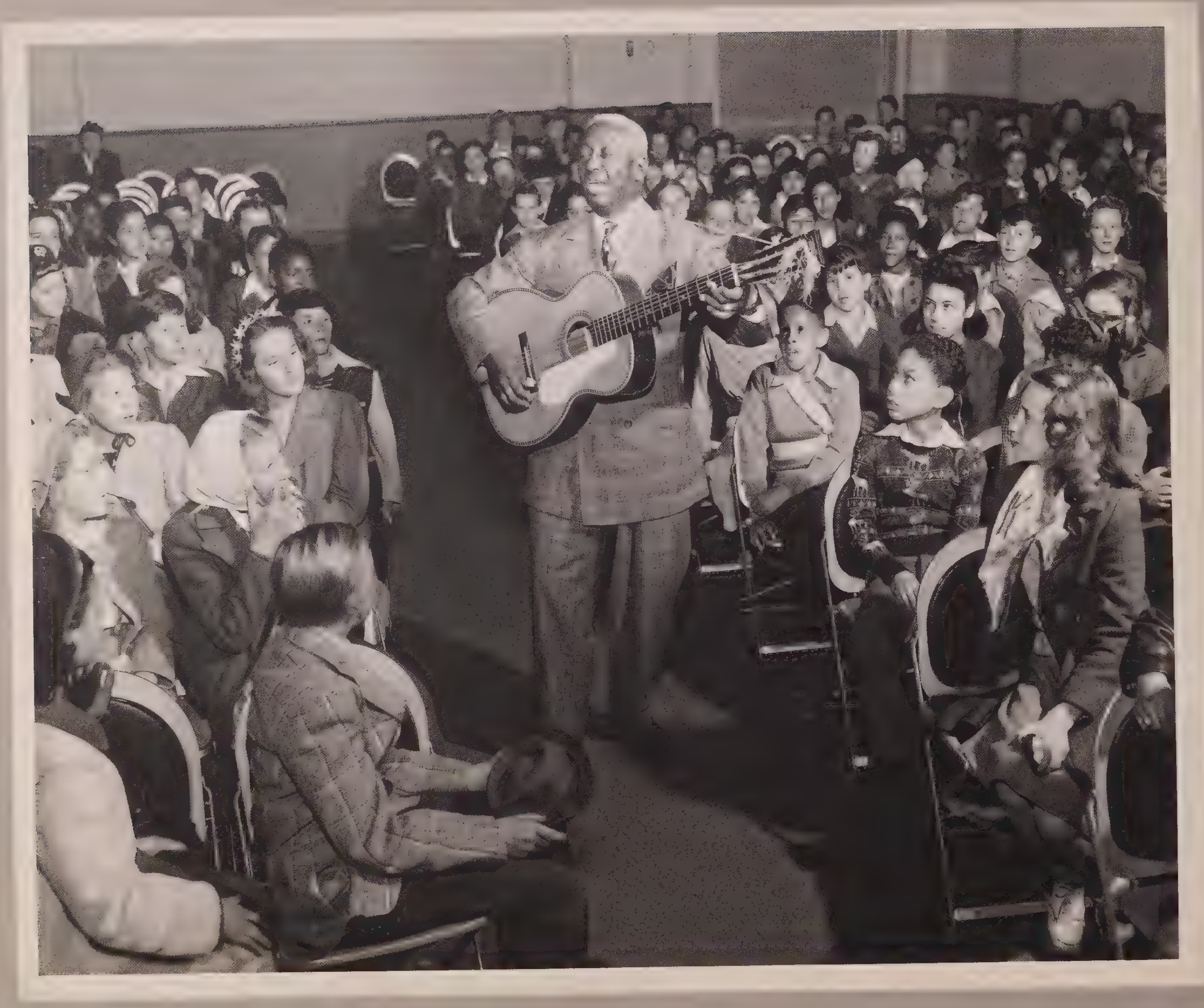
I am having a party
Sunday, May 23rd at
3 o'clock and I shall be
very happy if you will
come.

LeadBelly is to sing
and your Father and
Mother are welcome.

Robin Carson
131 West 10th St
New York N.Y.

R.S.V.P.

c 1935 The New Yorker, used with permission

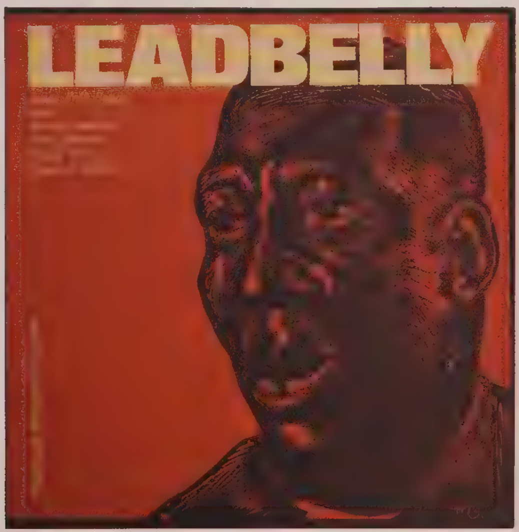


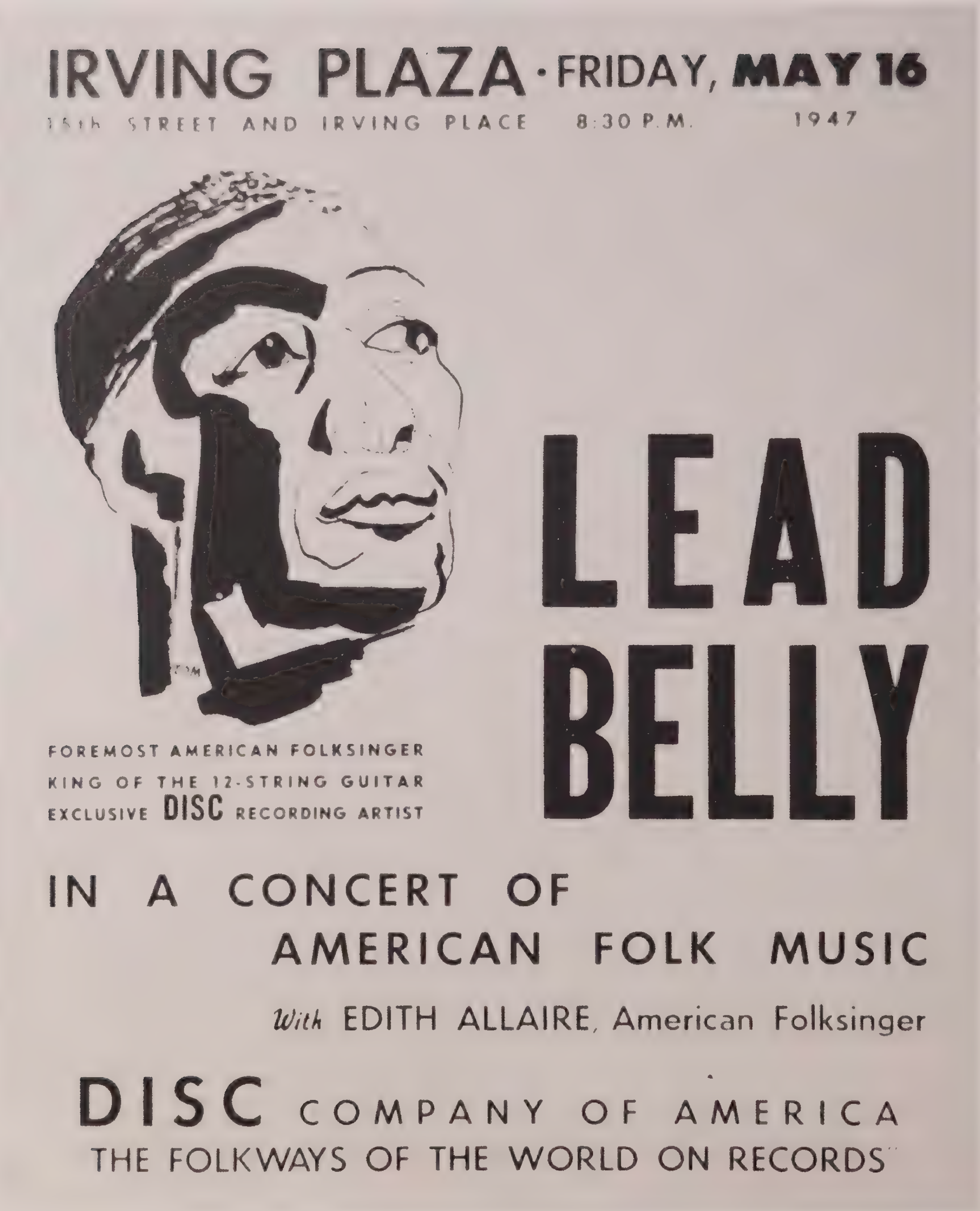
# ON CAMPUS, IN CONCERT

> *"Sure, I knew Huddie, he was the King of the twelve-string guitar pickers, and he could sing and play till you didn't know where you were at. You'd have thought he had a set of drums hidden in his guitar."*
>
> **Frank Gill**

*Lead Belly genuinely enjoyed entertaining people with his music. He especially enjoyed playing for young audiences, and the appreciative enthusiasm which greeted him. Lead Belly performed at the following schools.*

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Oct. 1934
Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, Dec. 1934
New York University, New York, Feb. 1935
University of Rochester, New York, Mar. 1935
University of Buffalo, New York, Mar. 1935
Buffalo State Teacher's College, New York, Mar. 1935
Albany State Teacher's College, New York, Mar. 1935
Albany Academy for Girls, New York, Mar. 1935
Harvard University, Massachusetts, Mar. 1935
Wilberham Academy, Massachusetts, Mar. 1935
Columbia University, NYC, Jan. 1939
Mills College, California, Feb. 1945
Hollywood High School, Los Angeles, Mar. 1945
California Labor School, San Francisco, Mar. 1945
Roosevelt Junior High, San Diego, Oct. 1945
Elizabeth Irwin High School, NYC, Mar. 1946
New York University, NYC, Mar. 1946
Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, May. 1946
Sarah Lawrence College, New York, July. 1946
Wayne State University, Detroit, Oct. 1946
University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Dec. 1946
Sarah Lawrence College, New York, Feb. 1947
New York University, Café Society/NYC, Mar. 1947
Cornell University, New York, Mar. 1947
Skokie School, Winnetka, Illinois, May. 1947
University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana, May. 1948
Phillips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire, Oct. 1948
New York University, Café Society/NYC, Nov. 1948
Allegheny College, Pennsylvania, Nov. 1948
St. John's University, Minnesota, Nov. 1948
Macalester College, St. Paul, Nov. 1948
University of Minnesota, Duluth, Nov. 1948
Grand Rapids Junior High, Minnesota, Nov. 1948
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Nov. 1948
Superior State College, Wisconsin, Nov. 1948
Carleton College, Minnesota, Nov. 1948
Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, Feb. 1949
Alfred University, New York, Apr. 1949
University of Texas, Austin, Jun. 1949
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Jun. 1949
Southwest Missouri State College, Springfield, Jun. 1949
Wayne State Teacher's College, Nebraska, Jul. 1949





IRVING PLAZA · FRIDAY, **MAY 16**

15th STREET AND IRVING PLACE 8:30 P.M. 1947

FOREMOST AMERICAN FOLKSINGER

KING OF THE 12-STRING GUITAR

EXCLUSIVE **DISC** RECORDING ARTIST

# LEAD BELLY

IN A CONCERT OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

*With* EDITH ALLAIRE, American Folksinger

**DISC** COMPANY OF AMERICA

THE FOLKWAYS OF THE WORLD ON RECORDS

### Lead Belly to Show N.Y.U. Students How He Sings His Way out of Jails

Lead Belly, swamp singer and self-acknowledged king of the twelve-string guitar, has offered to show New York University students of American ballads and folk songs how he sung his way out of two southern jail houses. Lead Belly (whose real name is Huddie Ledbetter) was brought to New York on New Year's eve by John A Lomax and his son Alan, compilers of "American Ballads and Folk Songs." Since his arrival he has sung over the radio, at many informal parties, including one given for Mayor LaGuardia, and has been asked to make records of fifty of his songs for a phonograph house. The Macmillan Company is to publish "Lead Belly and His Songs" on which he and Mr. Lomax are now working.

The jet-black negro minstrel made his offer to Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, whose claim to fame as an instructor in New York University has been overshadowed by the fact that it was in her house in Wilton, Connecticut that Lead Belly was married last Sunday. In fact the offer was made, Miss Barnicle reported yesterday, shortly after the wedding ceremony.

Miss Barnicle, familiar with the stories of Lead Belly's Harlem binges, was skeptical until his bride, Miss Martha Promise of Shreveport, La., laundress, gave the gangling balladeer his first taste of matrimonial orders.

"Ah'll see he get there, Miss Bahnicul," Martha put in, "though why them students wants to get out of jail houses 'fo' they gets in Ah don't know."

Miss Barnicle said yesterday that Lead Belly would not be the only guest artist to appear in her course on "American Ballads and Folk Songs" which she will give on Monday evenings, beginning February 4, under the auspices of the New York University Division of General Education. She is also bringing in some mountain balladeers and singers who, with their songs of antique gangsters and tall heroes, may outline lyrical programs for getting into jail.

Miss Barnicle's course, which is open to adults not working towards a college degree, will take up the study of British ballads brought to this country two centuries ago and still being sung in the Southern Appalachians, Cumberland Mountains, and Ozarks. It will include American-made ballads and folk songs; cowboy songs; sea chanties; railroad, mining, logging, Great Lakes, river and Erie Canal songs; blues, white and black spirituals; folk lullabies and ditties from the dope houses.

The course is one of several which will be offered by the Division of General Education in a program devoted largely to a new philosophy of informal adult education. "An alert and open mind" is the only admission requirement for many of the courses, and the objective of the program is described in a bulletin of the second semester courses just published.

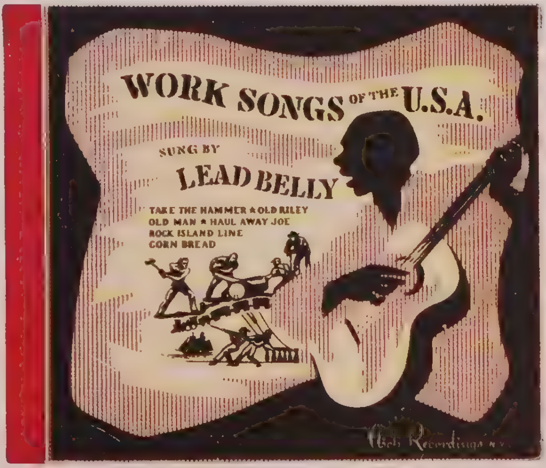

WORK SONGS OF THE U.S.A.
SUNG BY
LEAD BELLY
TAKE THE HAMMER • OLD RILEY
OLD MAN • HAUL AWAY JOE
ROCK ISLAND LINE
CORN BREAD
Asch Recordings

*photo by Willa Freeman Grunes*

## Lead Belly at Mills College

Lead Belly "is currently charming Bay Area audiences with his twelve-string guitar and 500 songs of rural life in these United States," wrote Mason Roberson in a March 1945 interview article. "I love to sing and play. Seems I never get tired," said Lead Belly, who is highly regarded for his ability to entice audiences into group singing. "I size 'em up … I play a few pieces … then I got 'em."

On Feb 15, 1945 at Mills College, a famous women's school in Oakland, Lead Belly sized up his audience, then sang a few "corn field hollers … which don't have rhyme or rhythm … it's just the way a fellow sings when he's walking down the road to see his girl at night or going into town." After the hollers, Lead Belly sang a few blues tunes to the Mills College students, "only I lift 'em up a little bit above barrelhouse … just a little bit … then I had 'em"

Alfred Frankenstein, highly regarded music critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle,* arranged Lead Belly's visit to the Oakland campus. Re-write editor of the *Mills College Weekly,* Nancy Griffiths praised Frankenstein who was a visiting fine arts faculty member. The *Weekly* noted that Alfred Frankenstein brings to the Mills community contact with the real, outside world. "We have an excellent permanent faculty, and the Administration's policy of supplementing it is a wise one which should be continued."

In preparation for Lead Belly's February visit Mr. Frankenstein's students studied many of Lead Belly's phonograph records during the fall semester. Meeting in the campus Concert Hall, Lead Belly responded by singing *Frankie and Albert, John Henry, Midnight Special* and *Boll Weevil* as well as playing some instrumental pieces on his twelve-string guitar. He asked the Mills women to join in on the chorus of many of his selections, observing that, "Girls really get in there. They catch the thing so nice."

The students applauded Lead Belly with wild enthusiasm after his last song. He was moved by their appreciation, and momentarily went back stage returning with a broom. Lead Belly told the Mills women, "Because you all are so sweet, I'm going to do a dance for you." He proceeded to improvise an original dance, explaining to the audience as he used the broom as a shotgun to fire at the Gray Goose flying across the sky. He showed a series of tap steps to indicate the different ways of walking on Broadway, walking in New Orleans, and walking on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. Lead Belly's dance encore brought the audience to their feet with long-sustained applause.

Martha Stumpf was a student in Alfred Frankenstein's class 50 years ago. There were 25 other students and the course was titled Folklore: Music and Art. The students had been thoroughly prepared by Mr. Frankenstein, and Lead Belly's presence in the Concert Hall "was really enjoyable." Martha Stumpf remembers that his voice was husky and full of pathos. Lead Belly didn't sing like anyone else she had ever heard. She had grown up listening to her father's jazz records. The Stumpfs had come to Oakland from Texas, the Dallas-Fort Worth area. It wasn't just Lead Belly's phrasing which she heard as a near cry or plea, but his overall delivery and presentation which built such rapport between Lead Belly and his audience.

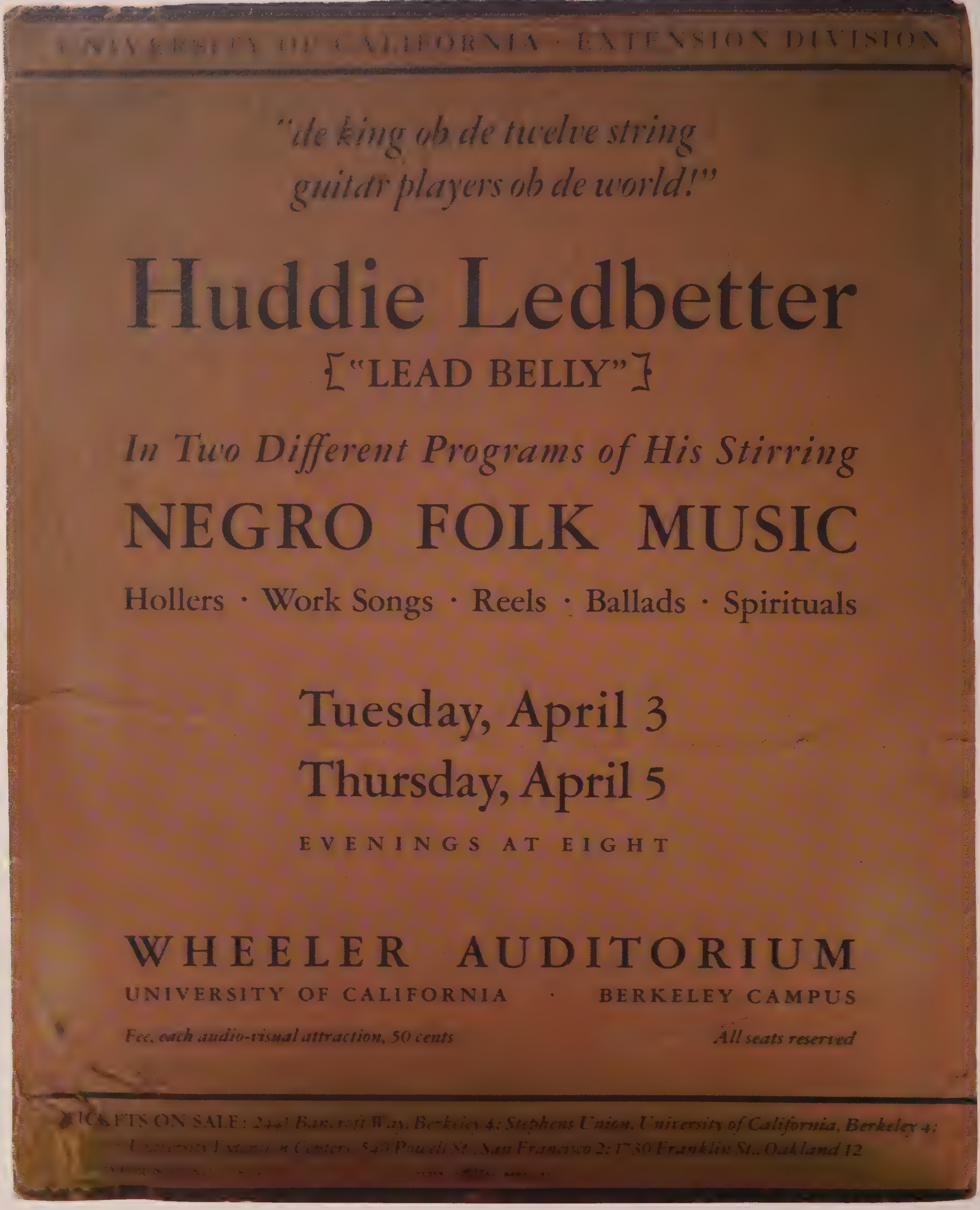
Lead Belly seemed to be a "very genuine person, not threatening nor foreboding," Martha Stumpf remembers, "There was almost a softness, a touch of shyness in him. Lead Belly was not awesome in his spirit or person, though his size was impressively big." From the stage he transmitted the sense of being a big man even though the hall was of fairly large size.

Lead Belly used "even the whites of his eyes to convey expression and meaning in his songs." Ms. Stumpf found him a "gentle man with no sense of anger." Even though the students had listened to many of his recordings, when Lead Belly first appeared on the Mills stage, "they were shocked because he was so distinctively different from the other smoother folk singers," she recalls. "But there was no mistaking his genuineness, his uniqueness, his originality."

In Lead Belly's renditions of *John Henry* and *Midnight Special,* "what he was expressing was real; other singers were just singing." Lead Belly very clearly and meaningfully explained to the Mills audience how work songs were used, and how the singer's distinctive grunt set the base beat. The students of Mills College understood that Lead Belly, in his songs, was telling them a true story.

A half century ago Lead Belly had sized them up, played a few pieces captivatingly, and captured the souls at Mills College.

**Sean Killeen**



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA · EXTENSION DIVISION

*"de king ob de twelve string*
*guitar players ob de world!"*

# Huddie Ledbetter

{"LEAD BELLY"}

*In Two Different Programs of His Stirring*

## NEGRO FOLK MUSIC

Hollers · Work Songs · Reels · Ballads · Spirituals

**Tuesday, April 3**
**Thursday, April 5**

EVENINGS AT EIGHT

## WHEELER AUDITORIUM

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA · BERKELEY CAMPUS

*Fee, each audio-visual attraction, 50 cents* *All seats reserved*

TICKETS ON SALE: *2441 Bancroft Way, Berkeley 4; Stephens Union, University of California, Berkeley 4; University Extension Centers, 540 Powell St., San Francisco 2; 1730 Franklin St., Oakland 12*

[illegible]

John Reynolds Collection

### In Closing Guitar Concert Ledbetter Offers Spirituals

Huddie Ledbetter, known outside the world of "Sinful Negro Songs" as Lead Belly, brought the soil of an oppressed race to the inner sanctum of theory and ideals.

King of the twelve-string guitar players, Ledbetter made his final campus appearance last night in Wheeler auditorium. He gave generously of the more than 500 songs in his repertory.

We have never heard an "artist" more capable in his own right. Completely unaffected, every song — regardless of what origin — reflected some phase of this man of terrible energy and his people.

He sang with an intensity and passion that swayed an audience many times unable to understand a word of his songs.

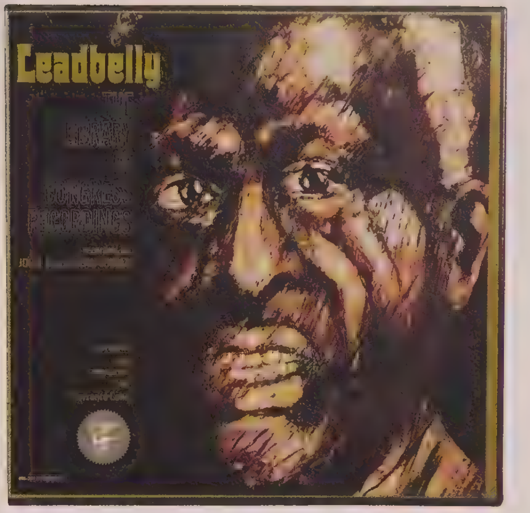
The "talkin'" between and preceeding each song seemed almost like another kind of "thinking in his heart" as he called it.

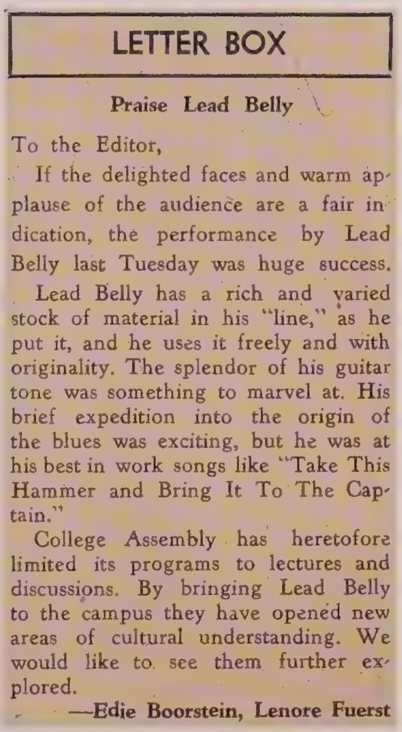
It was, furthermore, a remarkable device for maintaining continuity among diversified elements — a device as effective as accompanied dialogue in opera.

You could sense, too, in such songs as "Bourgoise Town" and others his bitterness of racial oppression.

In both local appearances "Lead Belly" gave a remarkably convincing picture of the state of his people since Civil War days.

**Bill Schauer**





LETTER BOX

**Praise Lead Belly**

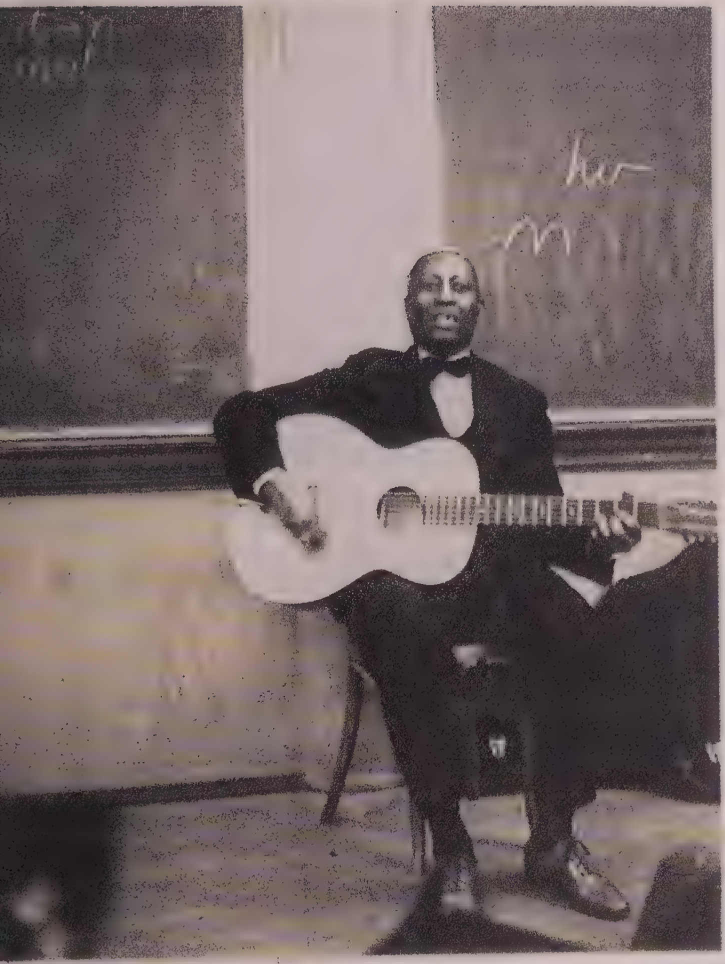
To the Editor,

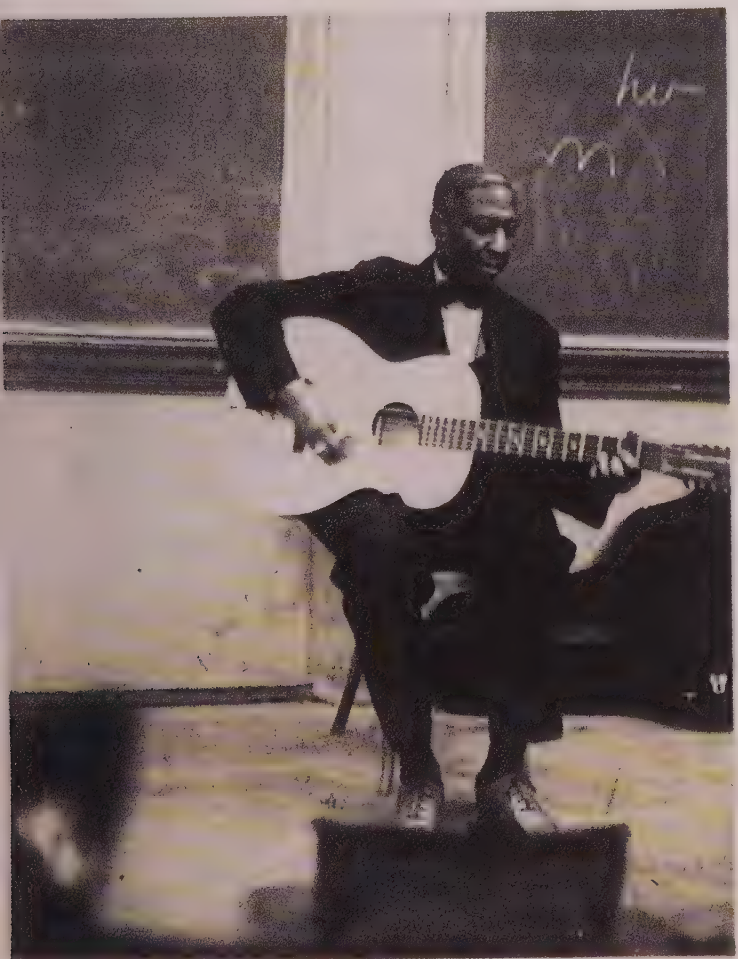
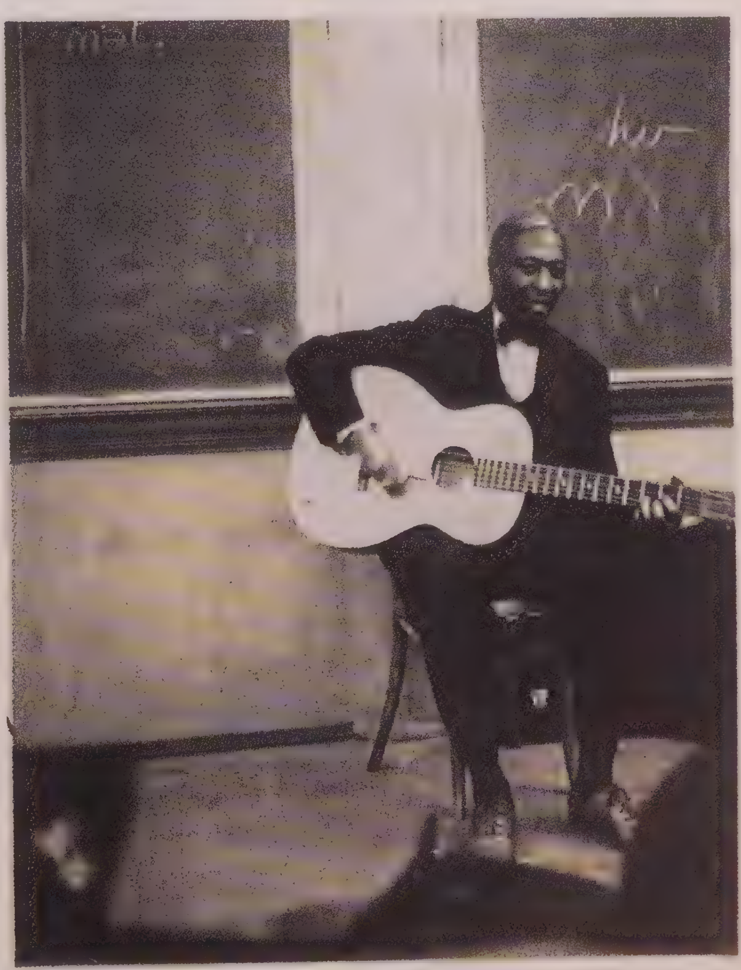
If the delighted faces and warm applause of the audience are a fair indication, the performance by Lead Belly last Tuesday was huge success.

Lead Belly has a rich and varied stock of material in his "line," as he put it, and he uses it freely and with originality. The splendor of his guitar tone was something to marvel at. His brief expedition into the origin of the blues was exciting, but he was at his best in work songs like "Take This Hammer and Bring It To The Captain."

College Assembly has heretofore limited its programs to lectures and discussions. By bringing Lead Belly to the campus they have opened new areas of cultural understanding. We would like to see them further explored.

—Edie Boorstein, Lenore Fuerst



SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

4/30/91

Dear Lead-Belly Letter;

In 1947 I was a student at Sarah Lawrence when the concert of Huddie Leadbetter took place. Today, I am the retiring chairman of the writing department. Perhaps being close to the college helps my memory; perhaps old age has opened more of the memory of the past as it shuts down or makes vague memories of the recent present.

The concert took place in Bates Hall, which was the faculty dining room and lounge. It had paintings on the wall by teacher and painter, Kurt Roesch. A new president (late changed the room to a Health Food Bar and cafe´ and painted over the murals that Leadbetter sang ~~[illegible]~~ in front of.

I had never seen him before, nor even heard of him. I was a veteran of World War II, still suffering from what was called flight fatigue (a form of anxiety) and embarrassed about that and my poorer presence in a college of what I thought were very rich young women.

Ledbetter was introduced, I think, by Mr Solomon, a white Georgian who knew Ledbetter as a friend in New York. Ledbetter introduced himself with his life and his journey (which indeed was his life) and began to sing and from time to time talk about the songs.

I had never heard such a pure performance, as if the music he sang was being created out of the person he was, standing there, as if Puccini were an opera singer who got up with his guitar and made up on the spot and sang those great arias he wrote.

I am not saying it right, but I can recognize it when it happens. I had the same sensation many years later watching Bo Diddley sing: the music seemed to be a creative construction of the man.

And to a lesser degree, because he was too scholarly, the same feeling a long time ago at an early John Coltrane concert.

Not that I knew this at the time. I only knew the stuff coming out was wonderful and indeed more wonderful than anything I had ever heard before.

After the concert, Ledbetter and a group of students, with Harold Solomon (who later went on to Columbia--he was called the (work coordinator) as the school had a plan like Bennington where students would work and then go to school. (Example, student majoring in political science might work at a union headquarters and learn the process and the meaning of the union functions.)-- all went out to a bar in Bronxville called The Tap. The management refused to seat Ledbetter and we all just got up and walked away. We went to one other bar in that village of bigotry and got the same treatment. It was like being slapped in the face* (I knew there was racism, but I had grown up in the north Bronx in a small house next to a house owned by a Mrs Callis and Mrs Garcia on the second floor.

Both women and their families were Afro-American, called Negro or Colored at that time and later in the sixties changing to Black.

My Italian parents had no training in racism, and indeed my father's mother, who had come to live with us a short time ago from Calabria in southern Italy, was much darker of skin than Mrs Garcia and Mrs Callis. My dad, a tailor, would make clothes for Mrs Callis. I grew up in this kind of world, and yet I knew there was this special insanity that would refuse people like Huddie Ledbetter, who I knew from that first night was a special man in the world, someone to revere and sustain and preserve, a chair and a drink and a sandwich.

This is no place for an essay on racism; we all know it too well. I am sick of talking about it to every new college generation, as if it just happened. Only action counts now.

That night we all walked to the Bronx River, bought some beer, and under the bridge heard a few more songs---wait--wait-- there were two concerts by Ledbetter! And one was earlier , in 1946-- had to be forty six because that is when I got out of the airforce and entered Sarah Lawrence. Yes, summer of 46, Ledbetter came to sing--first concert--and it was then the Tap refused us and it was then we ended up singing near the river.

This is all I can remember. Ledbetter was like an oral history; almost everything he said was a tale of his journey, like a living autobiography. I would also say that the way he talked showed he had a strong awareness of his important place in music (sometimes referring himself in the third person, a mark of people who see themselves in history already).

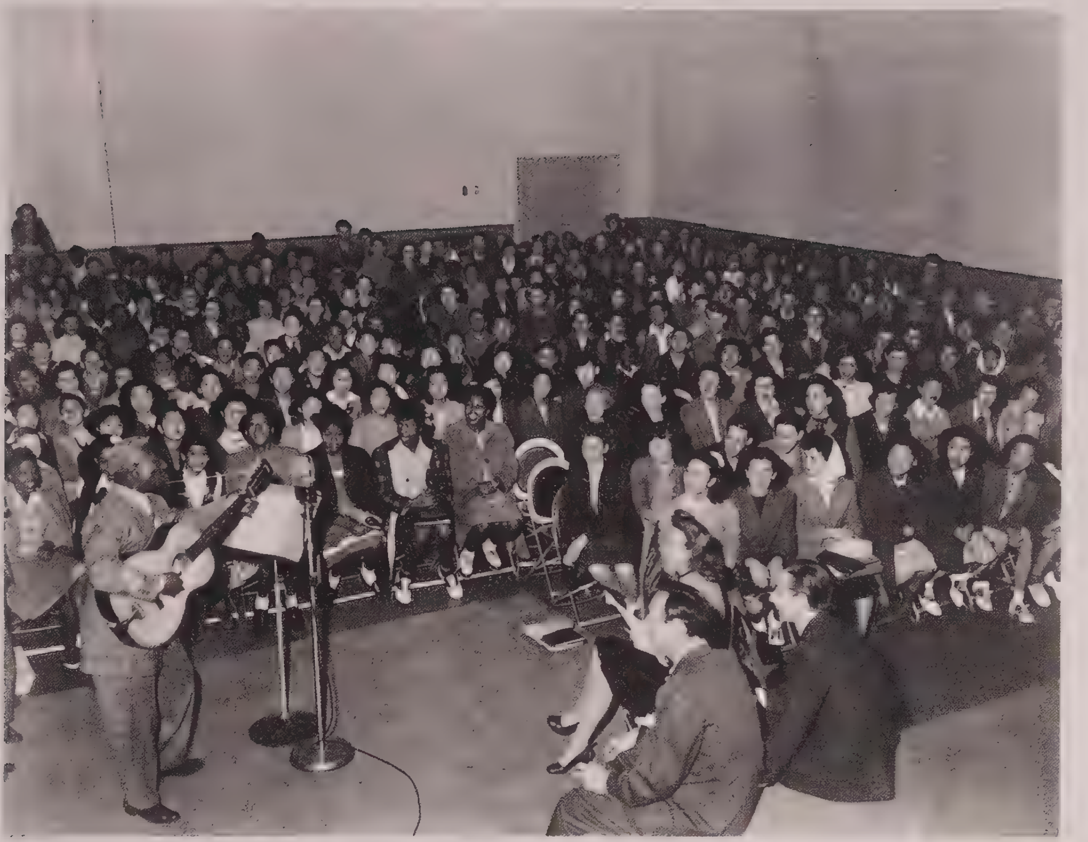
I never saw him again after the second concert. Harold Solomon went to Columbia, I went back to Italy for graduate training. The story ends in 1951.

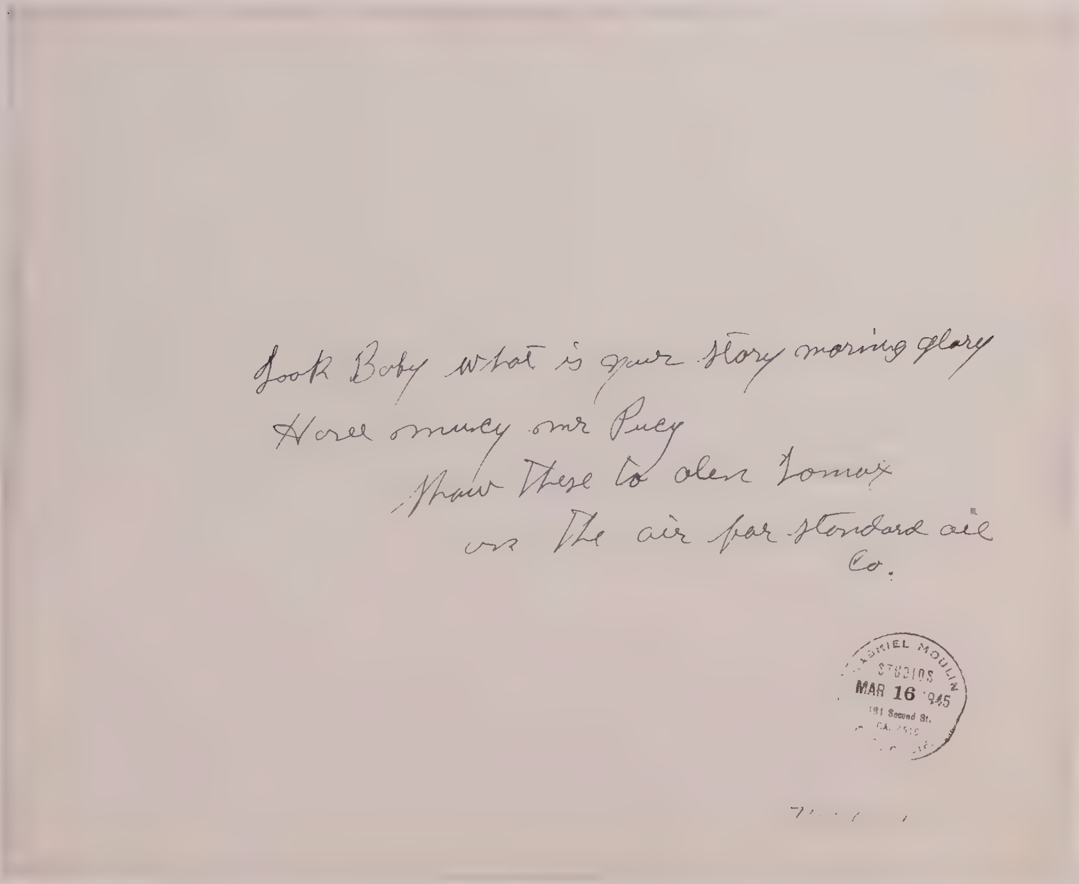
Joe Papaleo, writing dept, SLC

Joe Papaleo

*Orson Welles met Lead Belly at a party at Clark Gable's Hollywood home where he had been hired to sing for guests. Welles was instrumental in arranging for Lead Belly's subsequent radio appearances in San Francisco in 1944 for Standard Oil of California (pp. 60–63).*

*Photos courtesy Standard School of the Air*





Look Baby what is your story moring glory
Have mercy mr Pucy
Show these to alen Lomax
on The air for standard oil
Co.

ABRIEL MOULIN
STUDIOS
MAR 16 1945
181 Second St.

Lead Belly frequently wrote on the back of photographs he sent Martha

Courtesy of Max Jones Archive

# MARTHA

*"My wife is half my life; My guitar killed a cow and a calf, And that's the other half."*

### Mary on Martha...

let me tell you the difference
between me and sister martha.

when the dead get buried
beneath stone and stench
i'll give them my tithe
of tears and sweat, do my time
in the land of grief, then leave;
askin' jesus to give them peace.

martha, she'll try to change
the unchangeable, stay beside a body
beggin' god to give it a second chance
to breathe like a man.

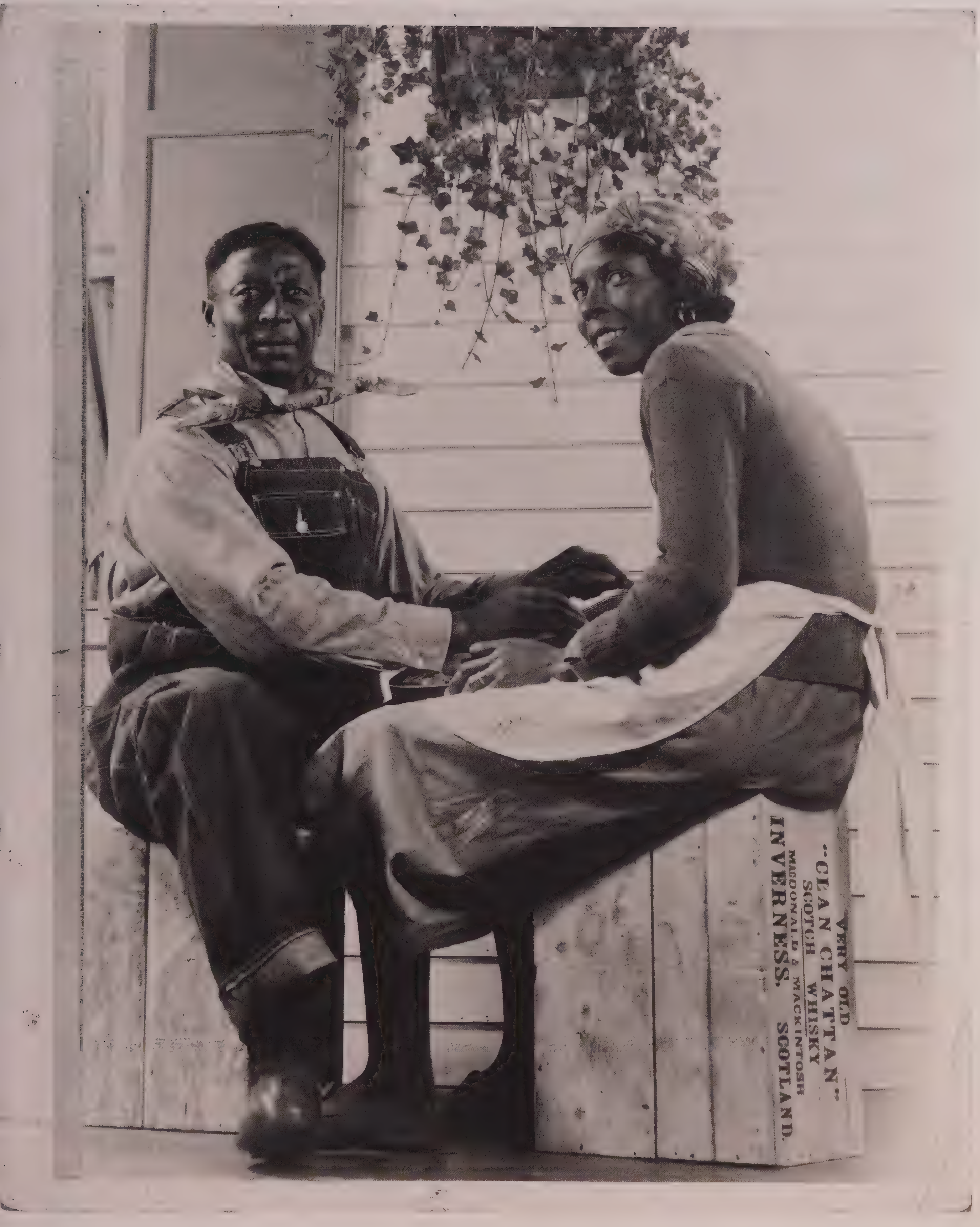
he was a casketful of tune
that made danger look like duty.
the swampland songster wanted
to swallow the world and spit out a rind,
to flood our skulls with the weight
of loss left coiling in his soul.
and if you weren't careful
he made you want to be in his song;
fill the gap between his breaths,
the space between his hands
blooming with guitar.
made you want to forget
he was tryin' to dig his way
out of his own grave.

and see, that's where martha and me split ways.
'cause when that gallows pole/death letter
blues was mudslidin' out his mouth,
i knew enough to get out the way,
watch from my safe distance of common sense.

it was all i could do to pray for my sister
each night she traveled back to the jook,
tell her to beware of that black snake
moan. it was all i could do.

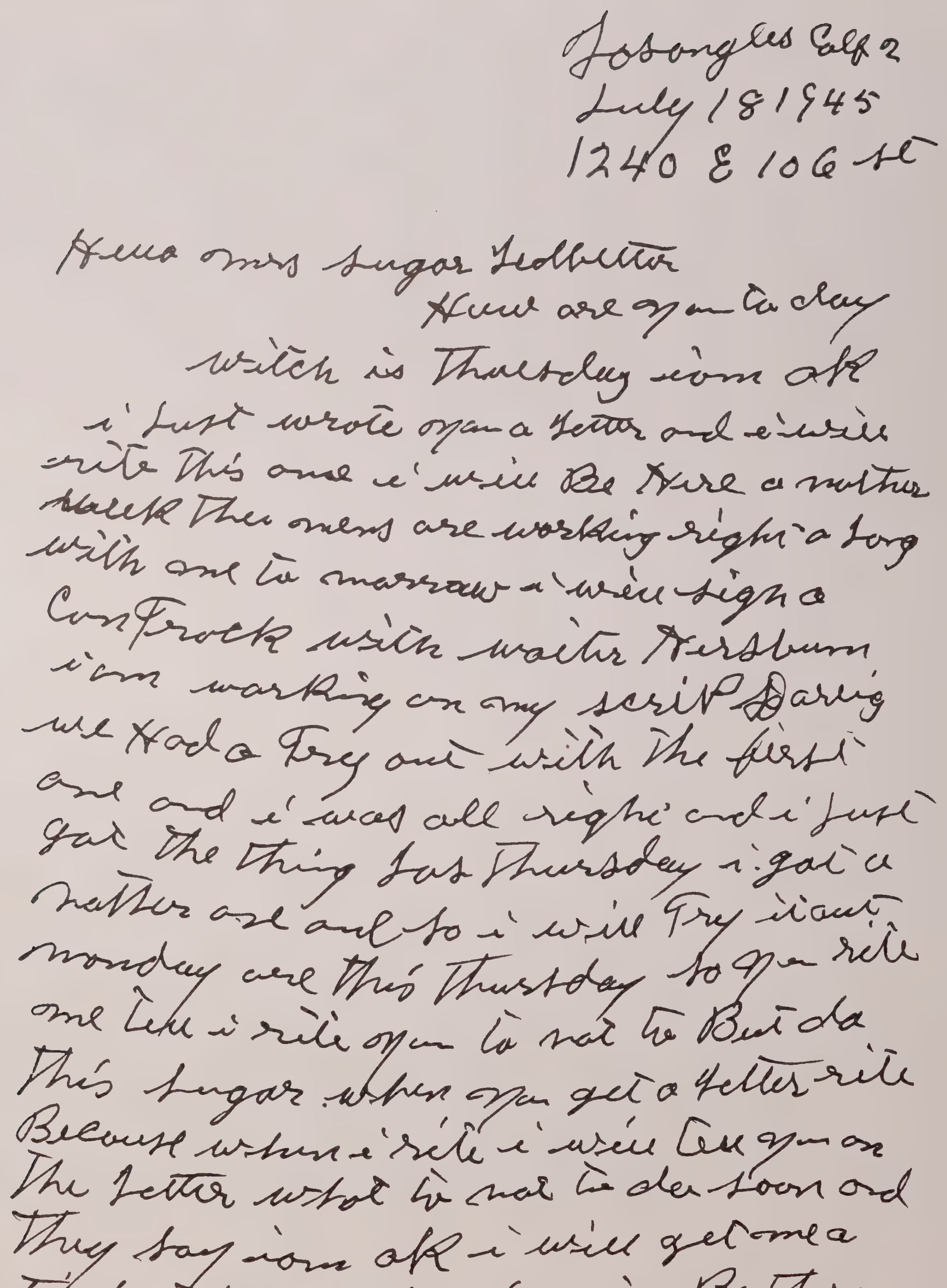
**Tyehimba Jess**

*Mary Promise with Edmon Ledbetter, 1959,*
*photo by John Reynolds*


VERY OLD
"CLAN CHATTAN"
SCOTCH WHISKY
MACDONALD & MACKINTOSH
INVERNESS. SCOTLAND.

*Publicity photo depicting Lead Belly and Martha as country bumpkins, his right foot tapping out the rhythm while his facial expression conveys his strong reservation about this demeaning type of publicity*

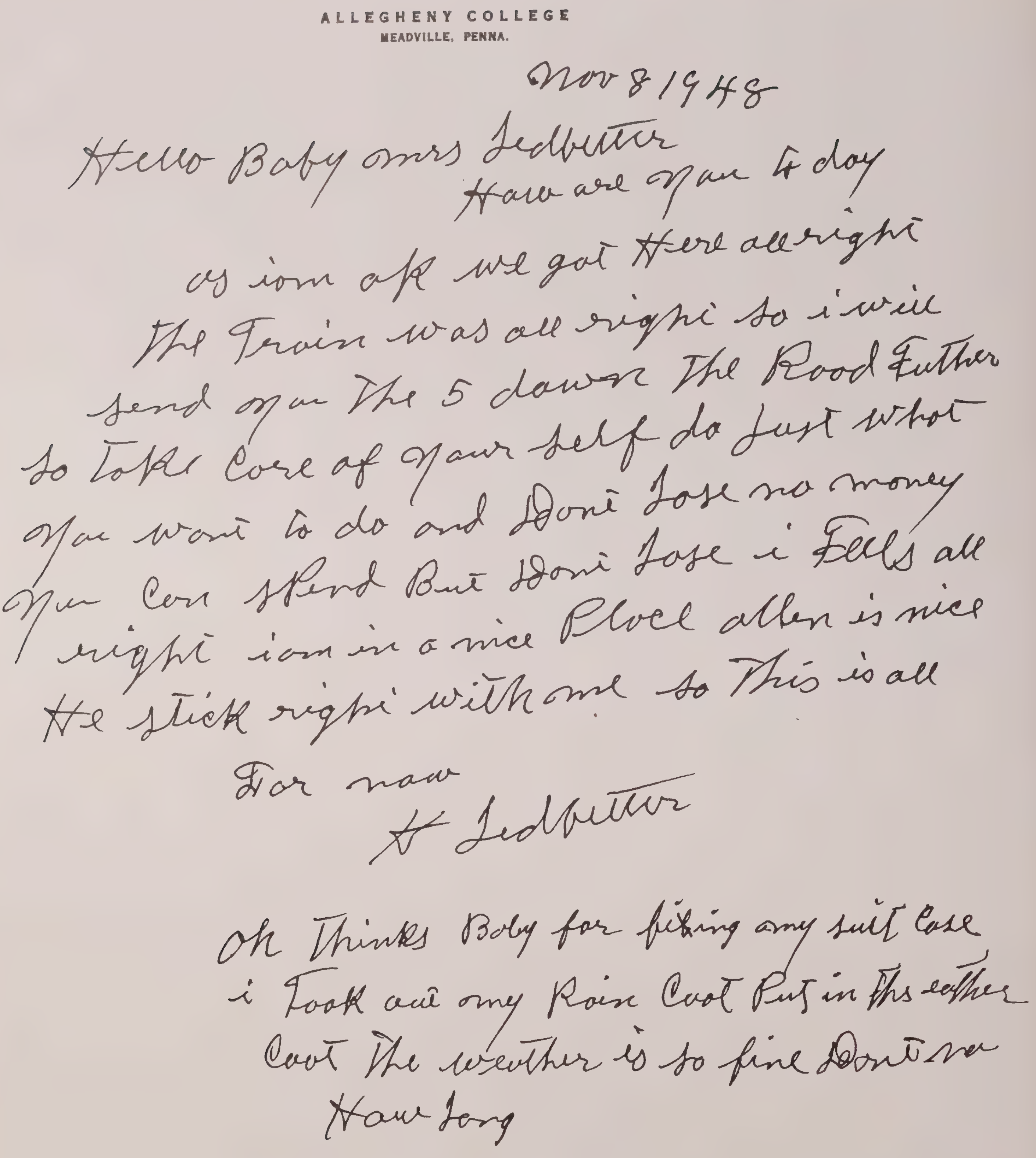
photo by Bernard Hoffman, 1937



Losongles Calif 2
July 18 1945
1240 E 106 st

Hello mrs Sugar Ledbetter
How are you to day
witch is Thursday i'om ok
i just wrote you a letter and i will
rite this one i will Be Here a nother
weeek Thee mens are working right a long
with me to marrow i will sign a
ConFrock with walter Hersburn
i'om working on my scriPt Darling
we Had a Tery out with the first
one and i was all right and i just
got the thing last Thursday i got a
nather one and so i will Try it out
monday are this Thursday so you rite
me tell i rite you to not to But do
this Sugar when you get a letter rite
Because when i rite i will tell you on
the letter what to not to do soon and
they say i'om ok i will get me a
ticket Home Then i will Be there
where you is i wont Hafter do nothing
But take it easy

Letter to Martha from Lead Belly



ALLEGHENY COLLEGE
MEADVILLE, PENNA.

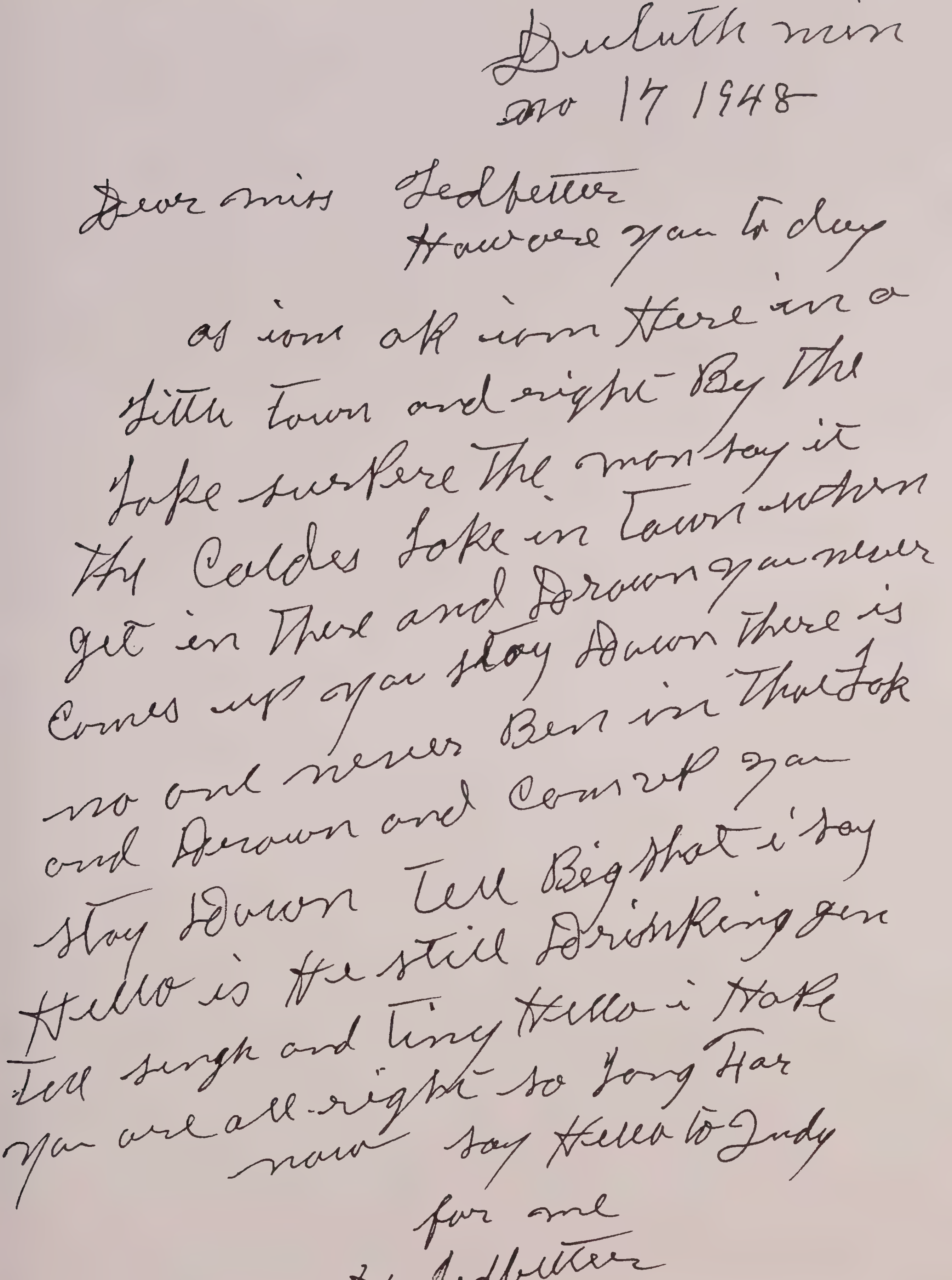
Nov 8 1948

Hello Baby mrs Ledbetter
How are you to day

as iom ok we got Here all right
The Train was all right so i will
send you The 5 down The Road Futher
so Take Care of your self do just what
you wont to do and Dont lose no money
you Can spend But Dont lose i Fells all
right iom in a nice Place allen is nice
He stick right with me so This is all

For now
H Ledbetter

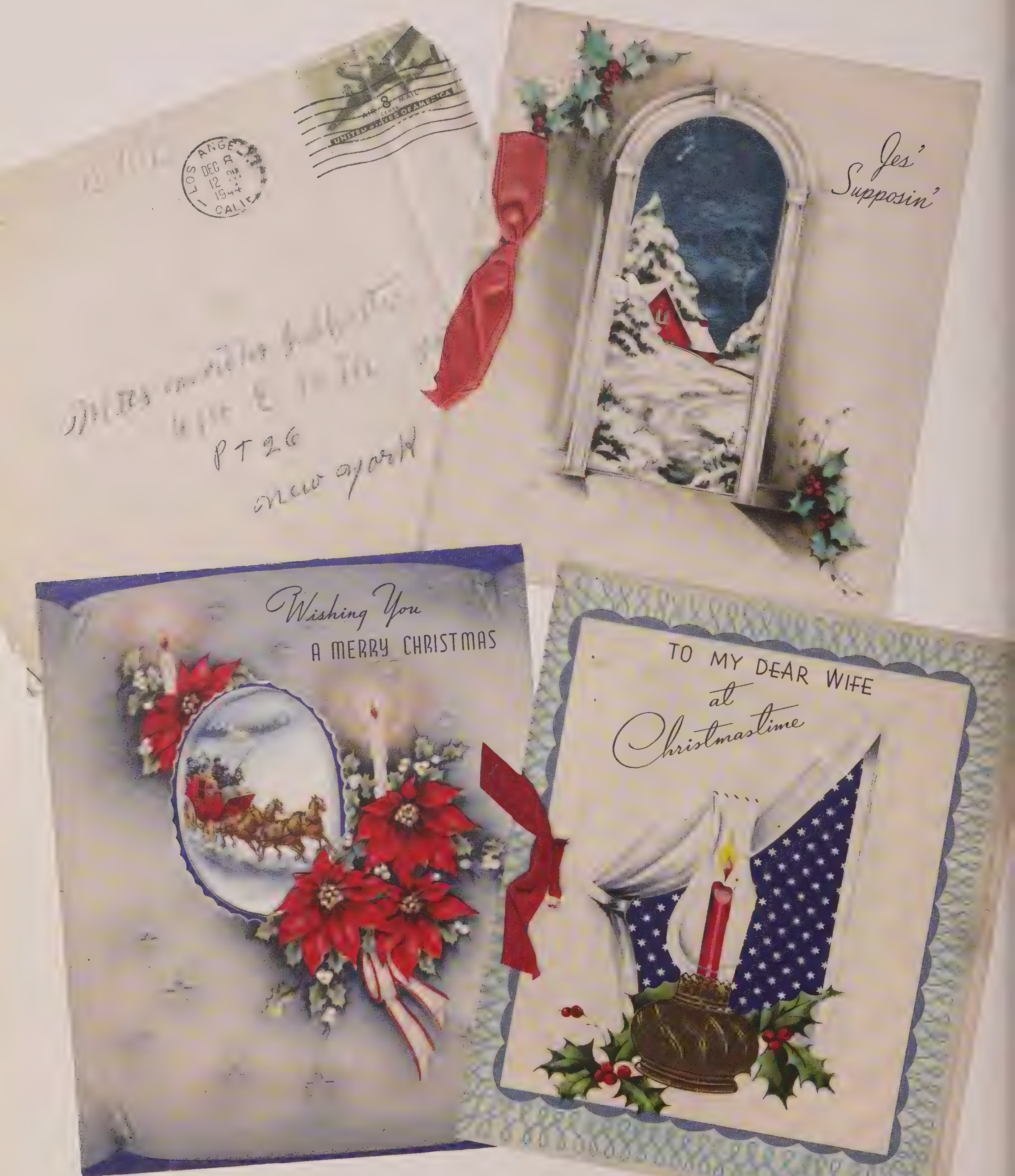
Oh Thinks Baby for fixing my suit Case
i Took out my Rain Coat Put in the other
Coat The weather is so fine Dont no
How long



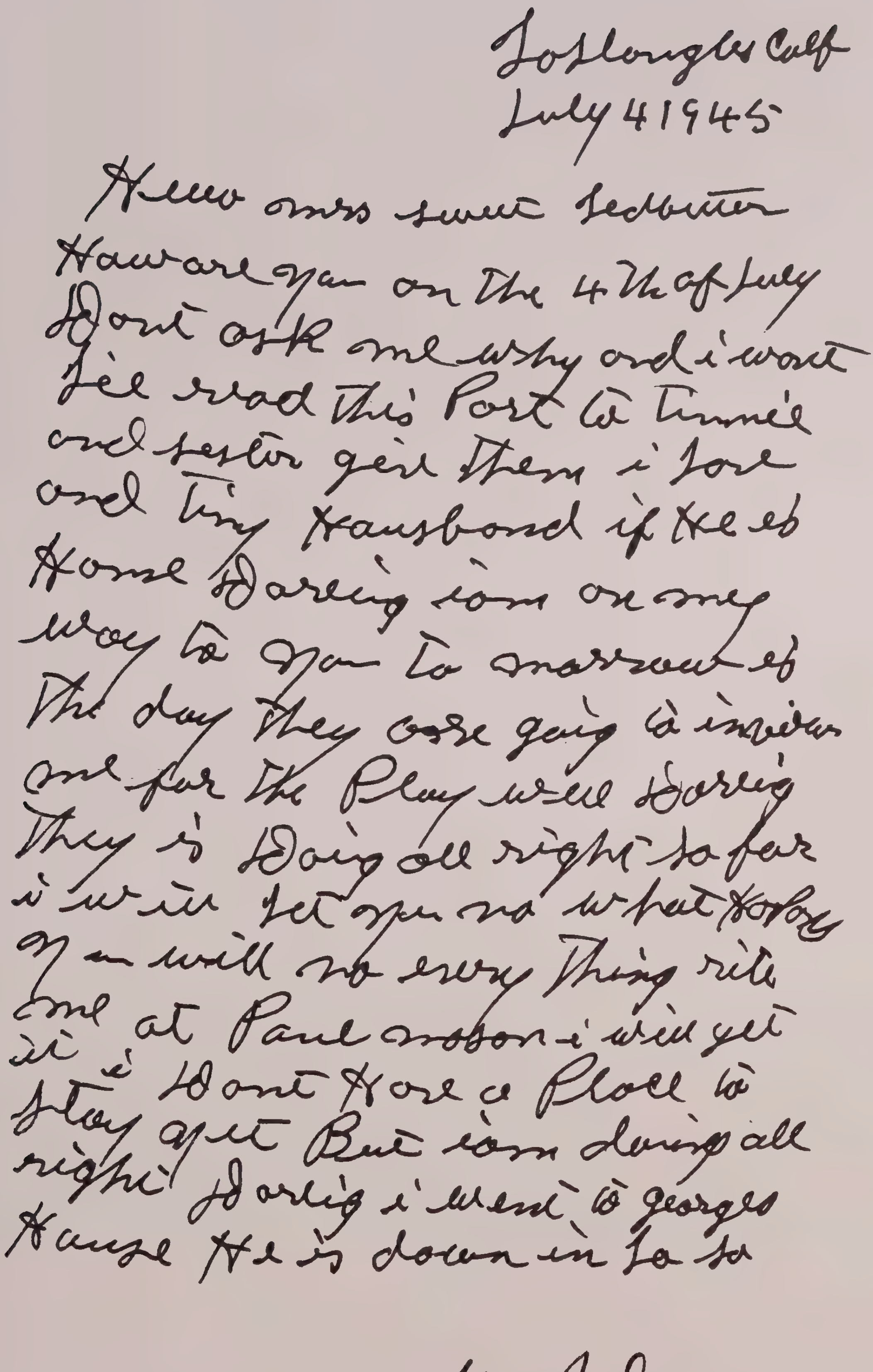
Duluth min
no 17 1948

Dear miss Ledbetter
How are you to day

as iam ok iam Here in a
little Town and right By the
Lake sure Here The man say it
The Coldes Lake in Town when
get in There and Drown you never
Comes up you stay Down there is
no one never Been in That Lak
and Drown and Come up you
stay Down Tell Big that i say
Hello is He still Drinking gin
Tell surgh and Tiny Hello i Hope
you are all right so Long Har
now say Hello to Judy
for me
H Ledbetter


LOS ANGELES CALIF DEC 8 12 PM 1944
AIR MAIL 8 CENTS UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
PT 26
new york
Jes' Supposin'
Wishing You A MERRY CHRISTMAS
TO MY DEAR WIFE at Christmastime

*On December 8, 1944, Lead Belly mailed Martha three Christmas cards tucked neatly inside one envelope. Each expressed a different romantic Holiday sentiment, and he signed only one — simply "H. Led" in pencil*



Los Longles Calf
July 4 1945

Hello miss sweet Ledbetter
How are you on the 4th of July
Dont ask me why and i wont
tel read this Part to Tinnie
and sestor give them i Love
and Tiny Housband if He is
Home Darling i am on my
way to you to marrow of
The day they are going to inview
me for the Play well Darling
They is Doing all right so far
i will let you no what Holly
you will no every Thing rite
me at Paul mason i will get
it i Dont Have a Ploce to
stay yet But i am doing all
right Darling i went to georges
House He is down in La sa

H Led

*Next page: Lead Belly and his 12-string guitar are the center of attention during this 1940's summer evening sing along with friends Josh and Mary White, Millard Lampel, Elizabeth Lomax, Martha Ledbetter and Alan Lomax*

# LEAD BELLY AS I KNEW HIM IN NEW YORK

> *"It was Lead Belly first. I knew what it was all about from the very front. I was right into blues."*
>
> **Janis Joplin**

My acquaintance with Lead Belly was rather slight. I knew him well enough to speak to and we knew each other's names. On the other hand I used to go at least two or three times a week to listen to him when he was holding down what I remember as his only really steady job — at the Village Vanguard, Max Gordon's place in Greenwich Village.

Huddie is, personally, a strange man; a combination of ferocity and folk-talent if we can believe what's been written about him, and if we can believe him as we know him, a sweet old boy who wouldn't hurt a fly. He is a striking man, with his dark skin in contrast to his white hair, and as a singer of folk songs an absolute wonder. His repertoire seems to be inexhaustible and includes a great many folk songs of white origin as well as the more 'native' Negro songs. Many of his most famous and most popular numbers are white in origin, such as *Midnight Special,* which I have heard sung by many white boys in the army, and the obviously English-derived *Irene.*

Huddie's effect on New York audiences varies greatly. At times the entire place is silent while he sings and on the choruses of his 'group' songs everybody joins in with tremendous gusto. I think the most popular of these on which everybody joins is an originally white folk song that Huddie always used to dedicate to the boys in the service because of the last verse:

*Well my Baby say she love me*
*And my Mama love me too*
*If my Baby don't love me,*
*Then I know my Mama do,*

and then on the chorus everybody would repeat after him,

*Well I know she do,*
*Yeah I know she do,*
*Yes I know she do*
*Well I know she do,*

and would sing about four or five choruses of this with the band helping him out and everybody singing with him. Another song that always got a huge response from this type of audience was *Irene,* which everyone got a kick out of singing with him.

On the other hand, at times he has no effect on the audience whatsoever. In some instances where the crowd is especially uninterested and overly drunk, the talking and general noise is so loud he can't be heard at all. Nobody seems the least bit interested in whether he sings or what he's singing about. There are always a certain number of people interested in folksongs or who just happen to know and like Lead Belly that will try to keep things as quiet as possible so as to hear him, but at times there's just nothing to be done.

I never tire of hearing him myself and I think that he is much more effective in person than on record. His voice seems to come out much better and I suppose the fact that he is apparent personally has a lot to do with it. I think perhaps another reason is

< *photo by Weegee*

that he isn't restricted as to time, etc., and can interpolate his own spoken remarks with much more freedom. The Village Vanguard, that is to say Max Gordon, has a policy of letting the people play or sing whatever they want with no interference from the management. In this respect it far outdoes places like Café Society that have a policy in relation to individual performances. Lead Belly has his own ideas on what the public likes. He has always sung when I made a request, probably because he knows that I have a genuine interest in what he's singing.

I've talked with Huddie a great deal about one thing and another; he has a tremendous spur-of-the-moment imagination, such as when I asked after the condition of a mutual friend of ours in the hospital and Huddie told me that he had "de bleedin' Ulcers and T.B.", and that his wife was "makin' a baby." About half of it was true but apparently the rest of it appealed to Huddie's imagination and he was mournful as hell about it. Didn't really give the guy much of a chance to live at all.

I remember buying him a drink once in a while and he invariably drank claret, I've never seen him at all under the influence of liquor and when I have bought him a drink he'd make a glass of claret last all night. When I last spoke to him, just before going into the army over a year ago, he told me that he and Martha had Sonny Terry living with them in New York. Sonny is almost blind. From the way Huddie spoke it didn't sound like Sonny was working at all at the time.

Huddie was at the time holding down a full-time job with Max Gordon and was singing at private parties and meetings on the side. He was in great demand at the Leftist meetings, union rallies and similar functions, and apparently at smaller parties too. Around Christmas last year he offered to sing for me a whole night for ten dollars at a party because he said "It's comin' near Christmas, and I need the money". He is quite proud of his playing ability and is always introduced not as a singer, but as the "King of the twelve-string guitar players of the World."

He once boasted to me in his own gentle way of his ability as a concertina player, and promised to bring it along some night to play for me. He told me he had just bought a new one. I've never heard him speak of his records at all, not a word, and when they are mentioned he more or less passes them over. Most musicians tend to emphasize their recording activities, Huddie on the other hand seems to have forgotten that he ever made any records. I think that this is just another indication of his very modest character in the company of people he is not well acquainted with: he is proud of himself as I have said, but he prefers somebody else tell the world about it.

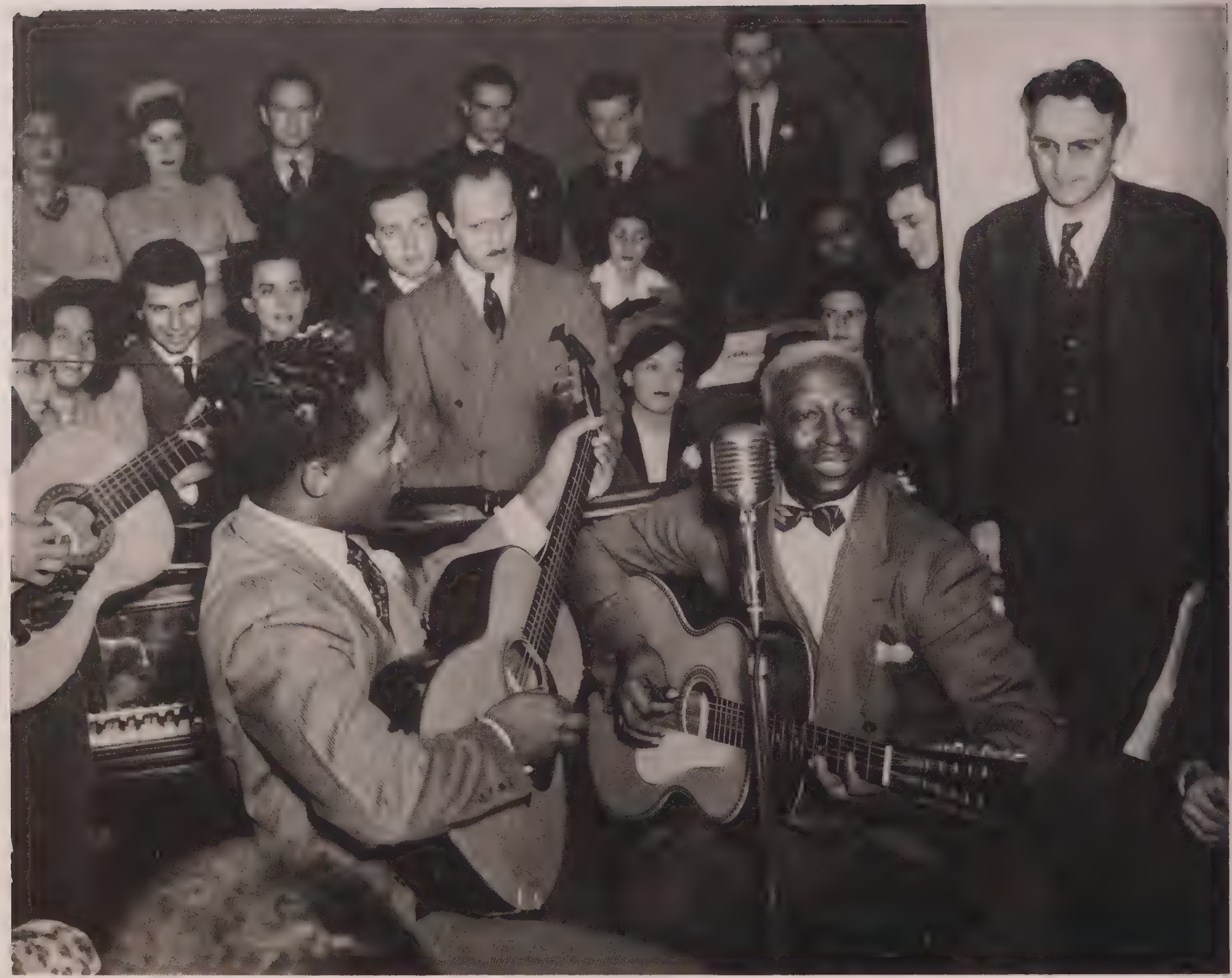
**Mike Alegria**

**LEAD BELLY**
**AMERICAN FOLK SINGER**
KING OF THE 12 STRING GUITAR
***TONIGHT ONLY***
*An Evening of Folk Music*
FROM PRIMITIVE SPIRITUALS
TO BOOGIE WOOGIE
TONIGHT ONLY AT 8:30
**FRIDAY, MAY 16th**
Irving Plaza—Irving Pl. at 15th St.
Tickets—$1.80, 1.40, 1.20.
**LEAD BELLY**

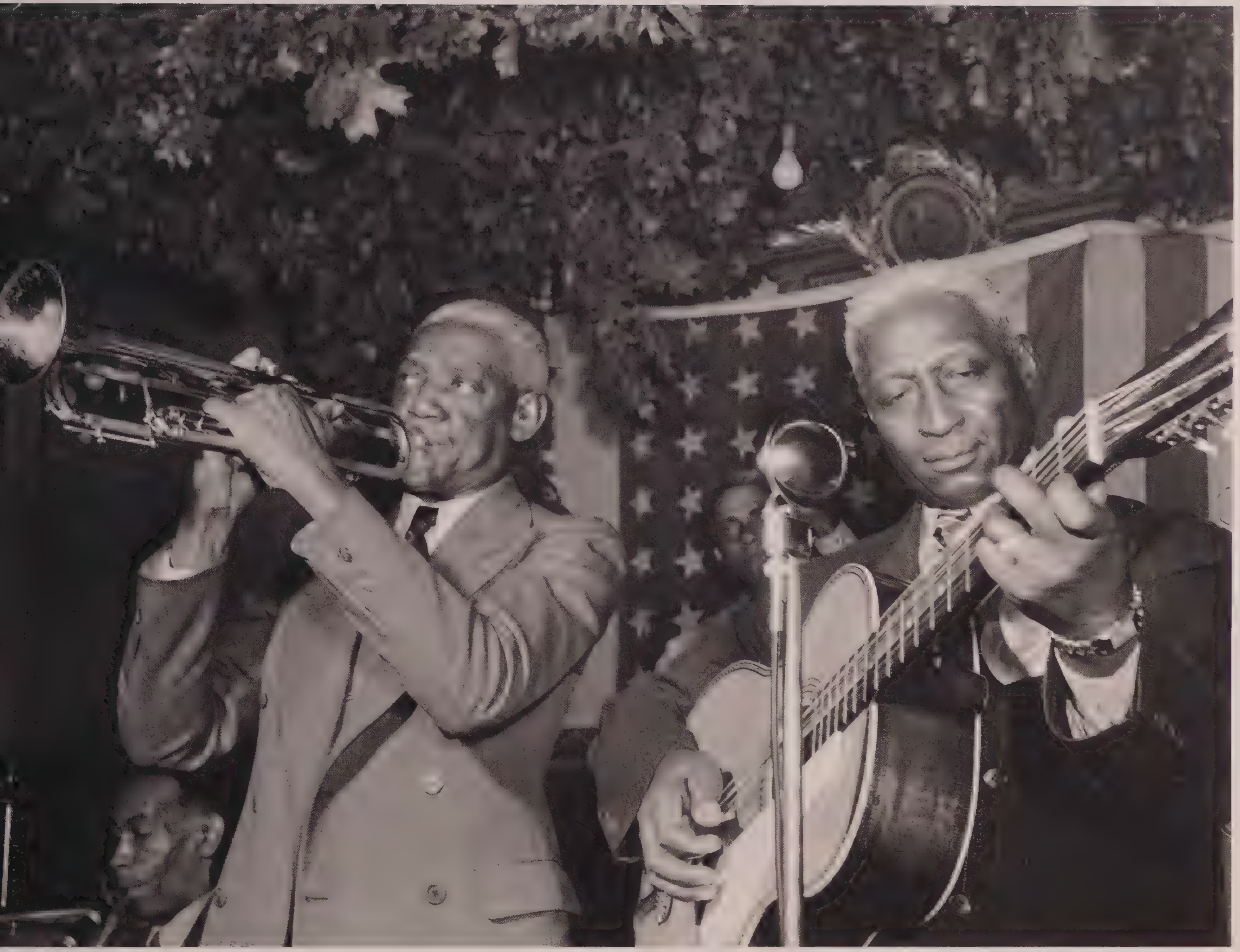
Courtesy of Carlo Pappolla Collection

Courtesy of Carlo Pappolla Collection

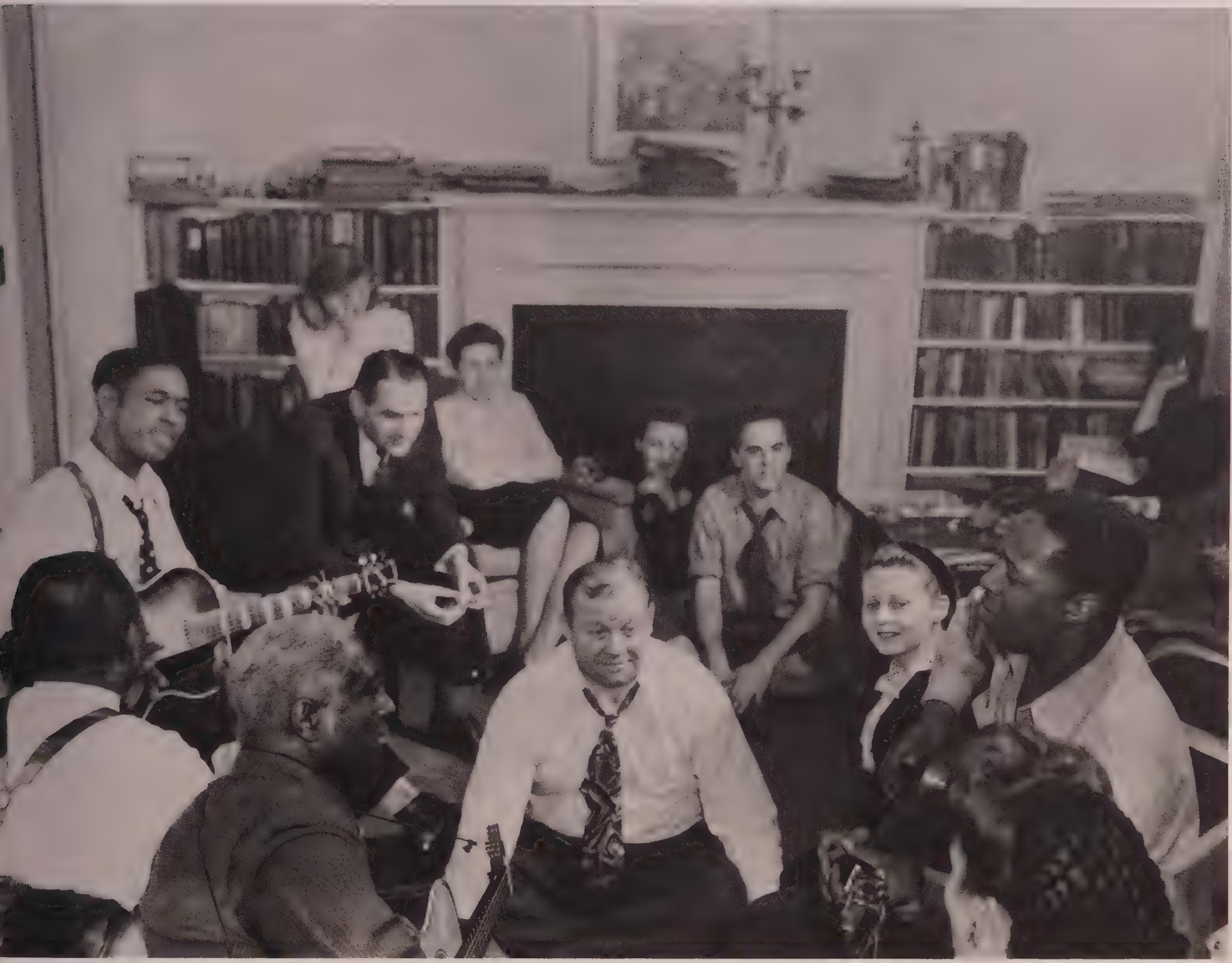
Courtesy of Carlo Pappolla Collection



*Lead Belly, always anxious to play for an appreciative audience, made the rounds in San Francisco in 1944. Here he is at a radio broadcast accompanied by Woody Guthrie (guitar, extreme left) Josh White as Earl Robinson looks on*

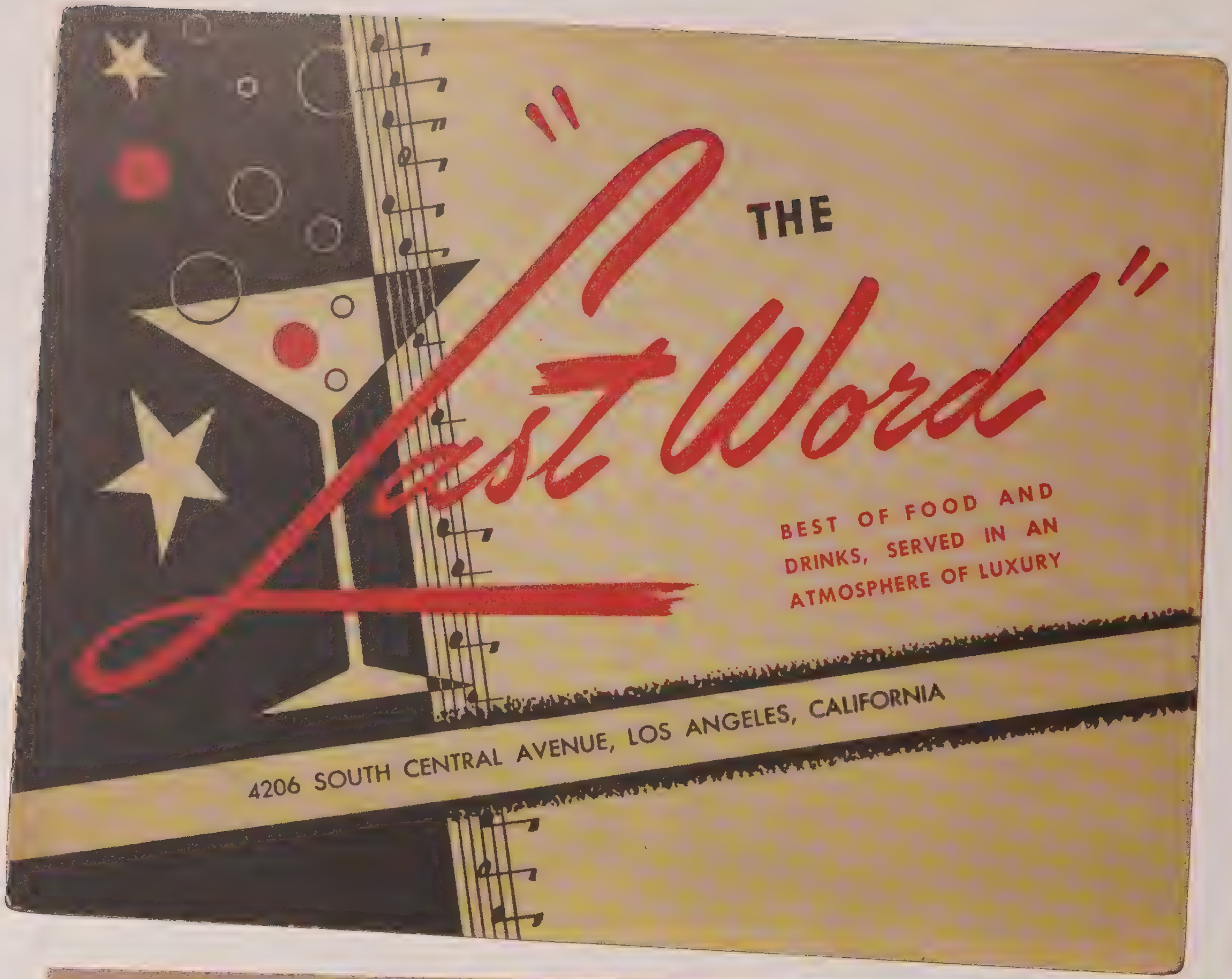


*Bunk Johnson on trumpet and George Lewis (seated) on clarinet*
*photo by William P. Gottlieb*



*Clockwise from back center: Alan Lomax (grey shirt), Josh White, Burl Ives, Lead Belly, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Lee Hayes and others gathered at a friend's apartment in New York City, 1946*

*photo by William P. Gottlieb*

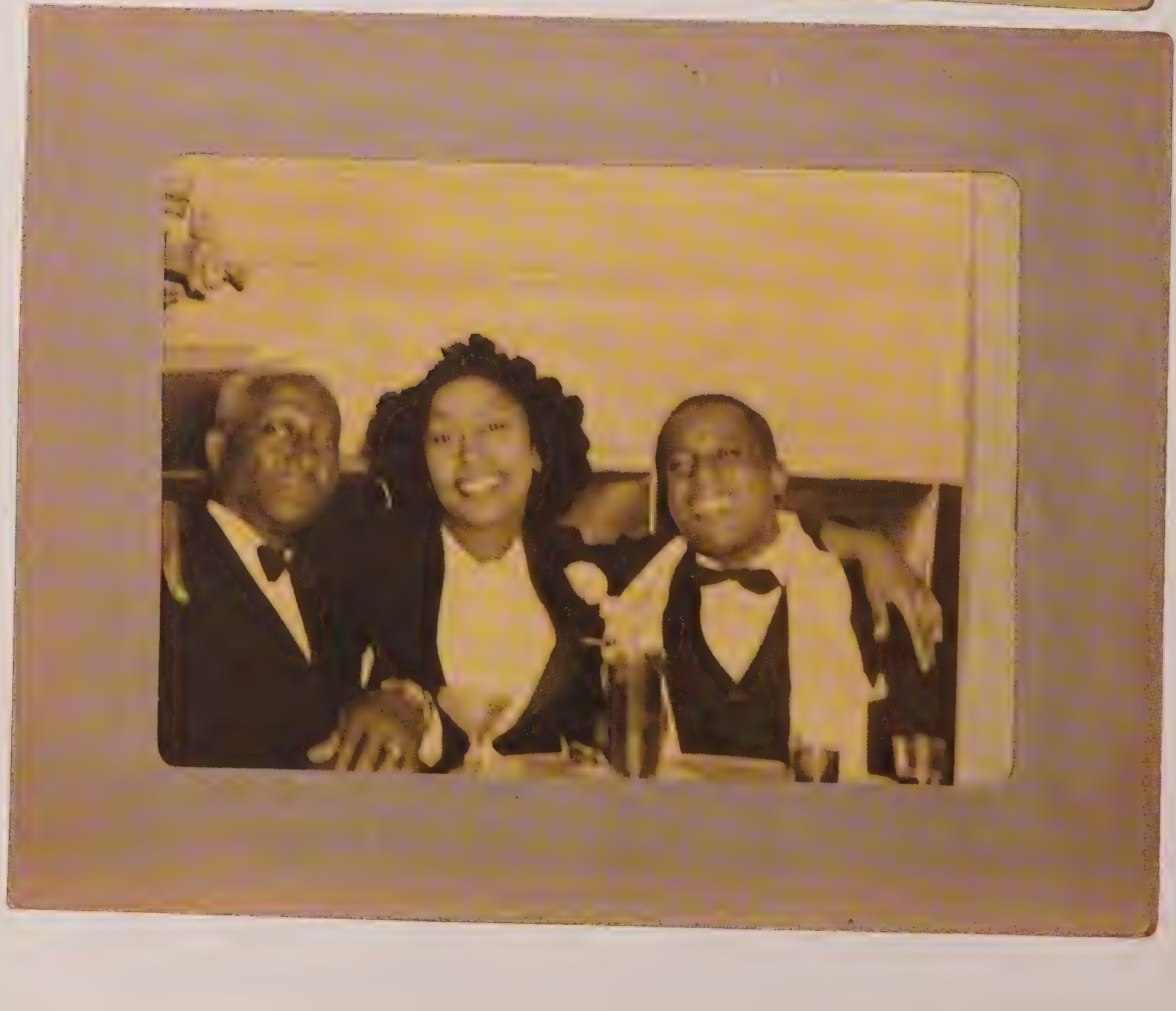


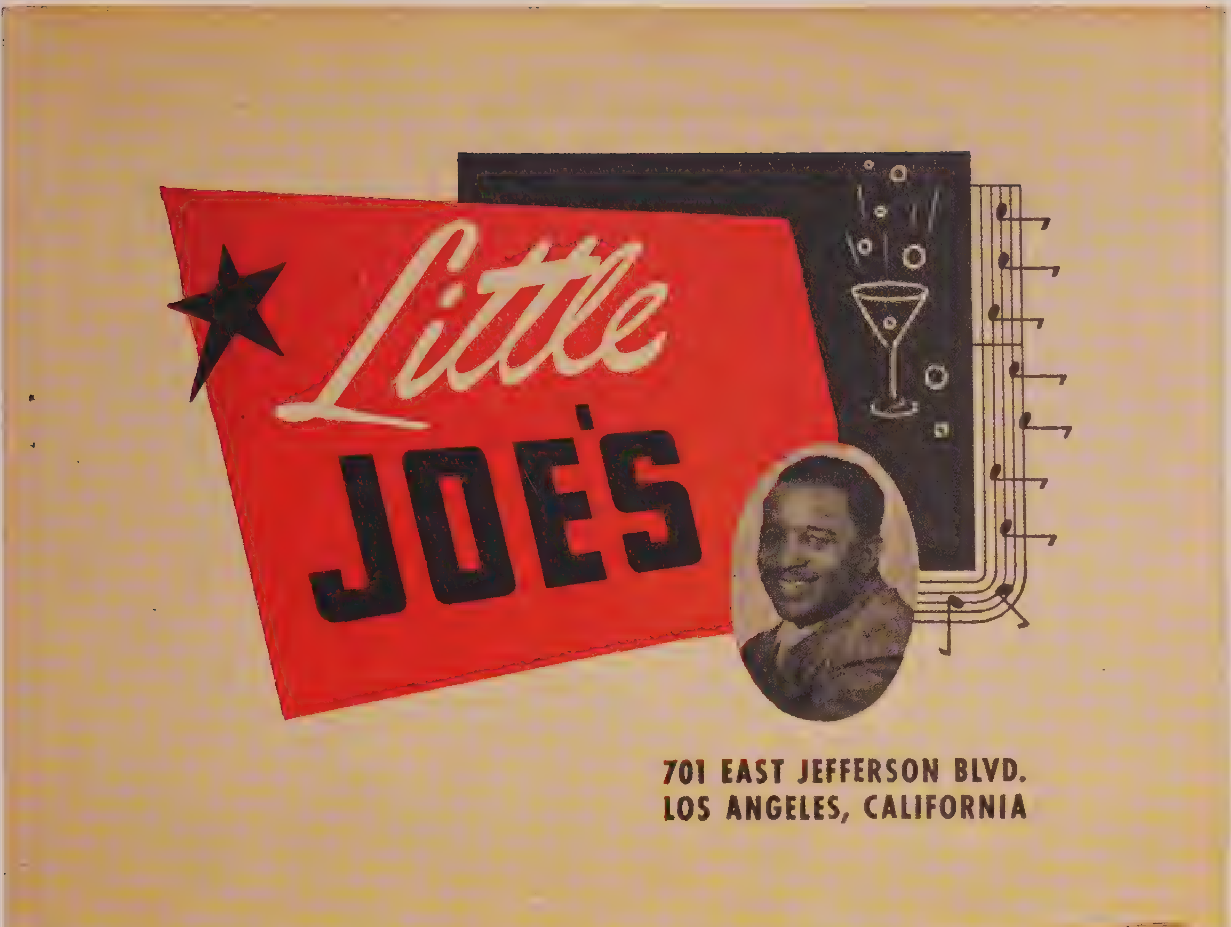
THE

"Last Word"

BEST OF FOOD AND
DRINKS, SERVED IN AN
ATMOSPHERE OF LUXURY

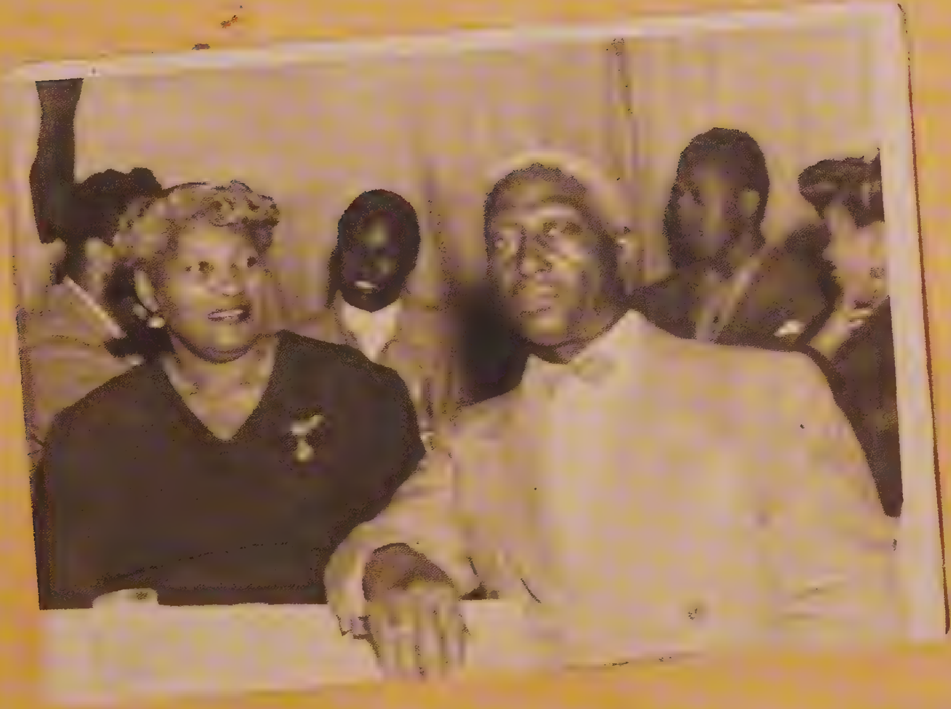
4206 SOUTH CENTRAL AVENUE, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

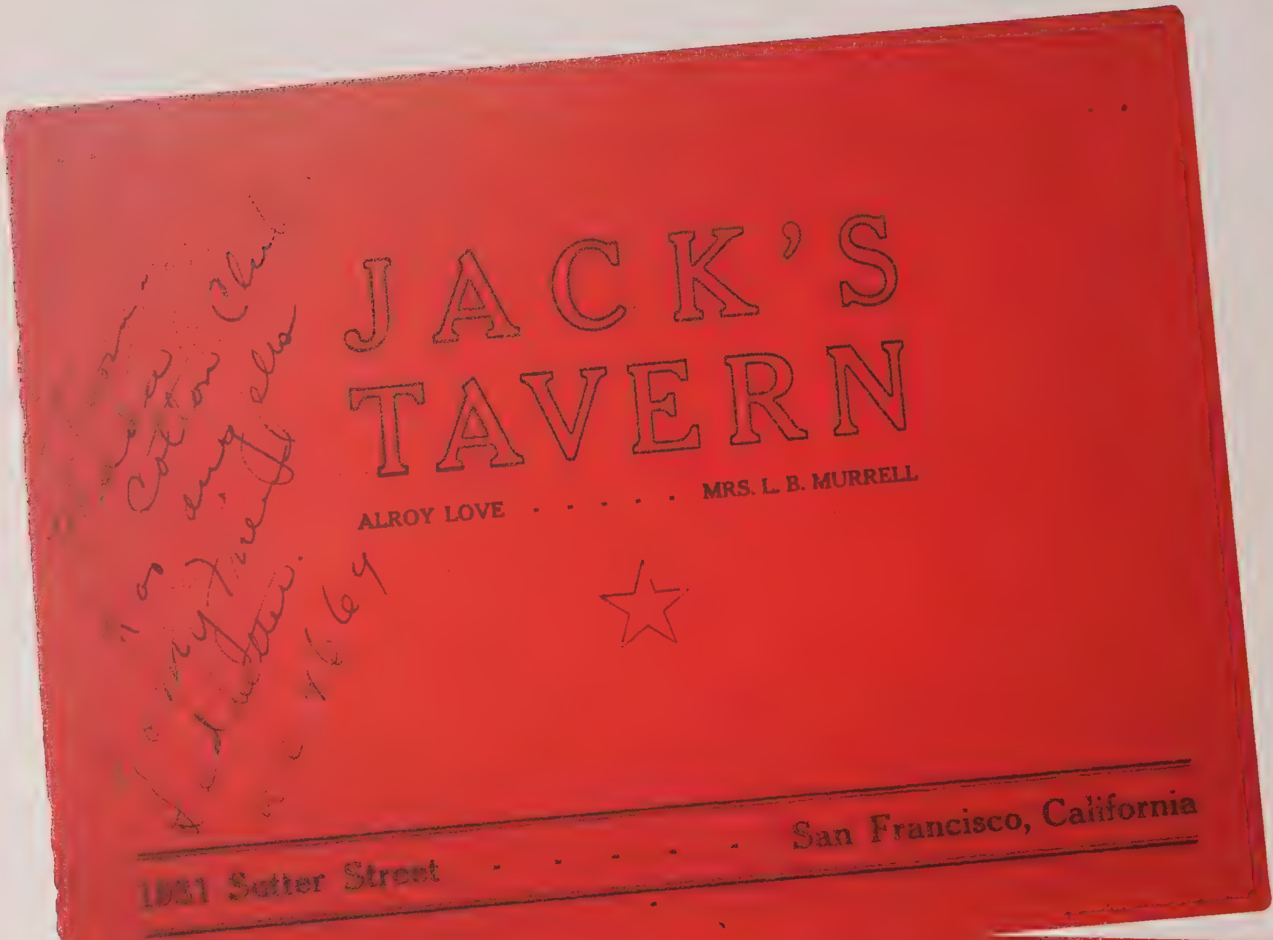




Little JOE'S

701 EAST JEFFERSON BLVD.
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA





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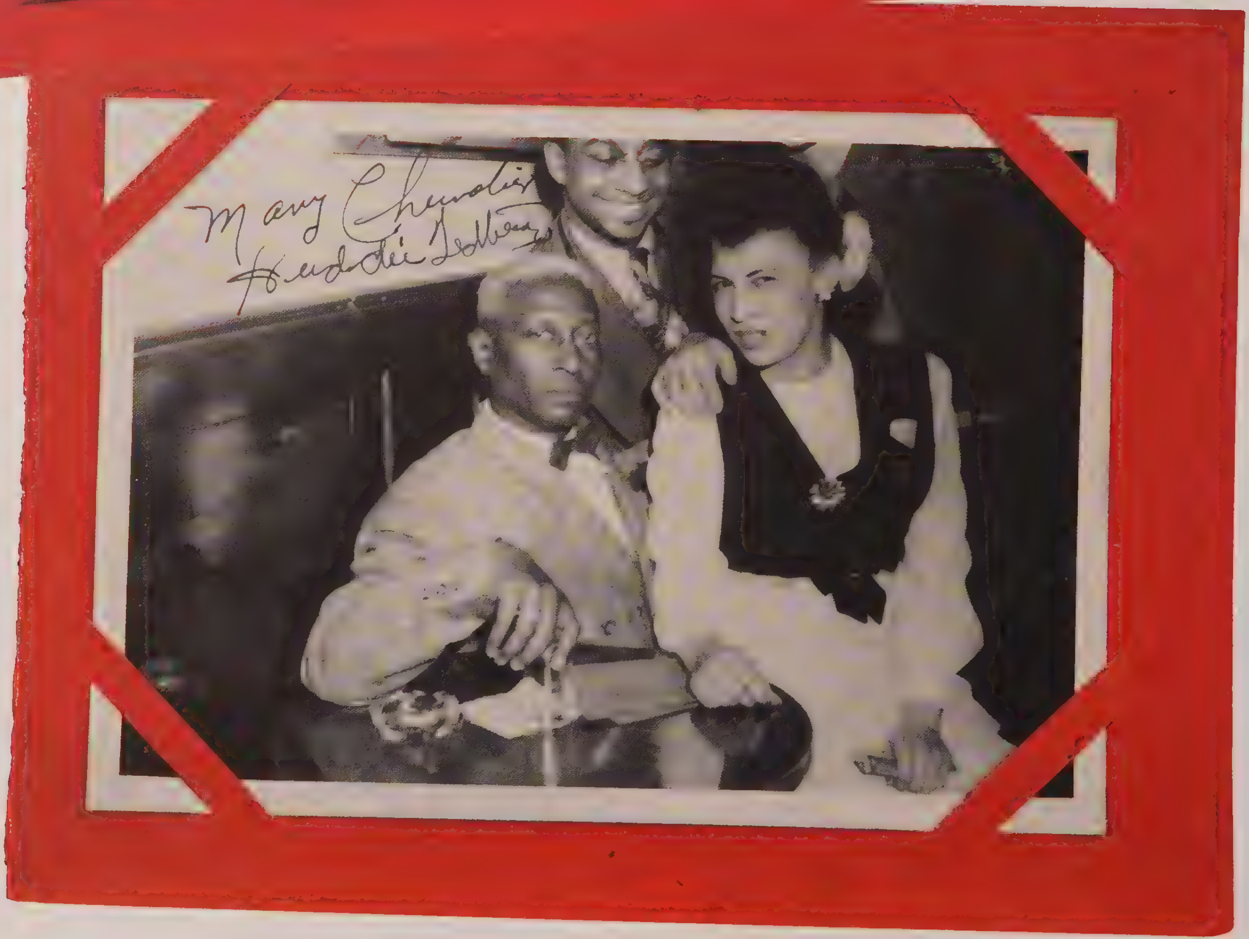
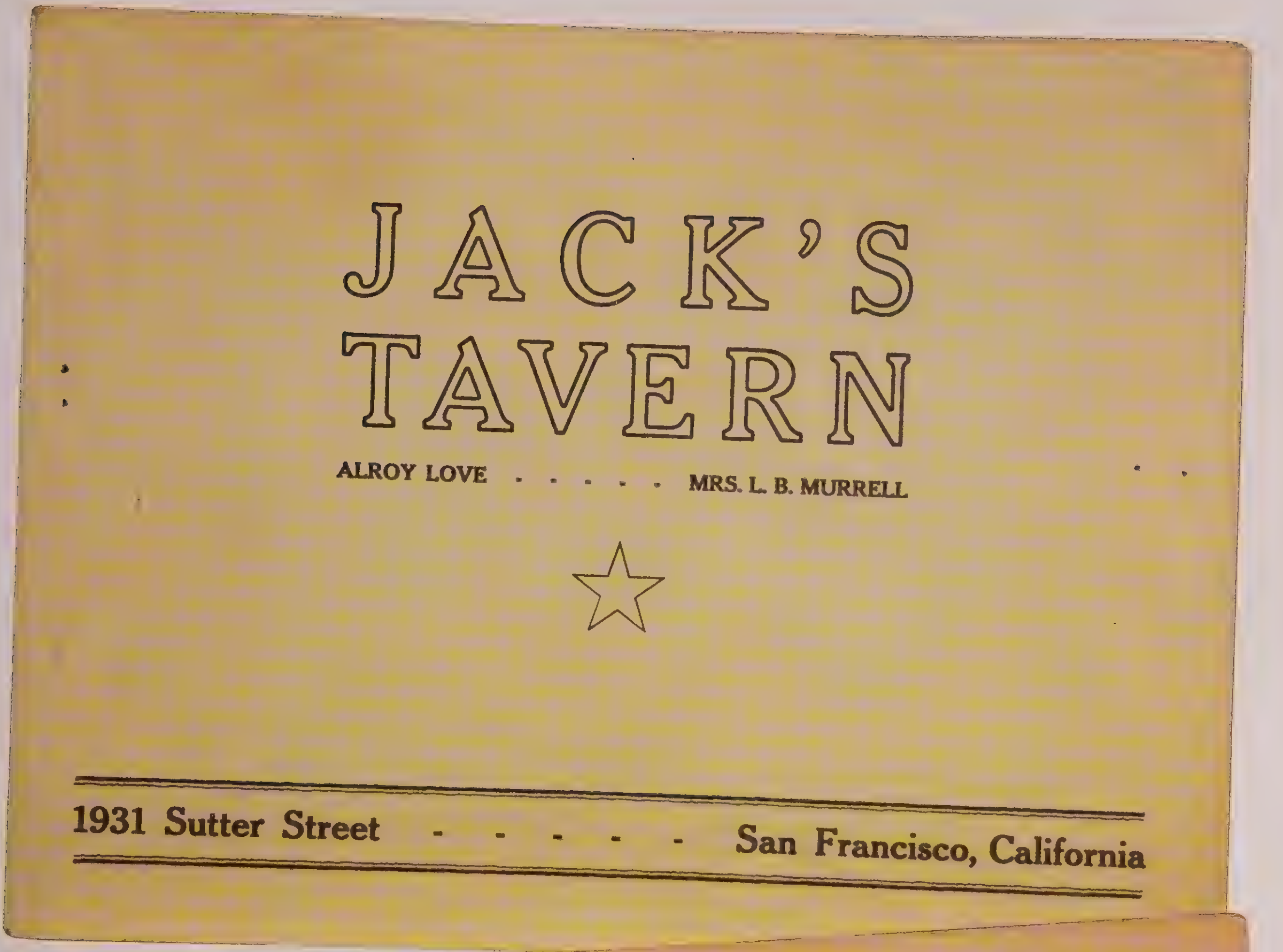
JACK'S
TAVERN

ALROY LOVE . . . . . . . MRS. L. B. MURRELL

1931 Sutter Street . . . . . . . San Francisco, California



Mary Chandler
Huddie Ledbetter

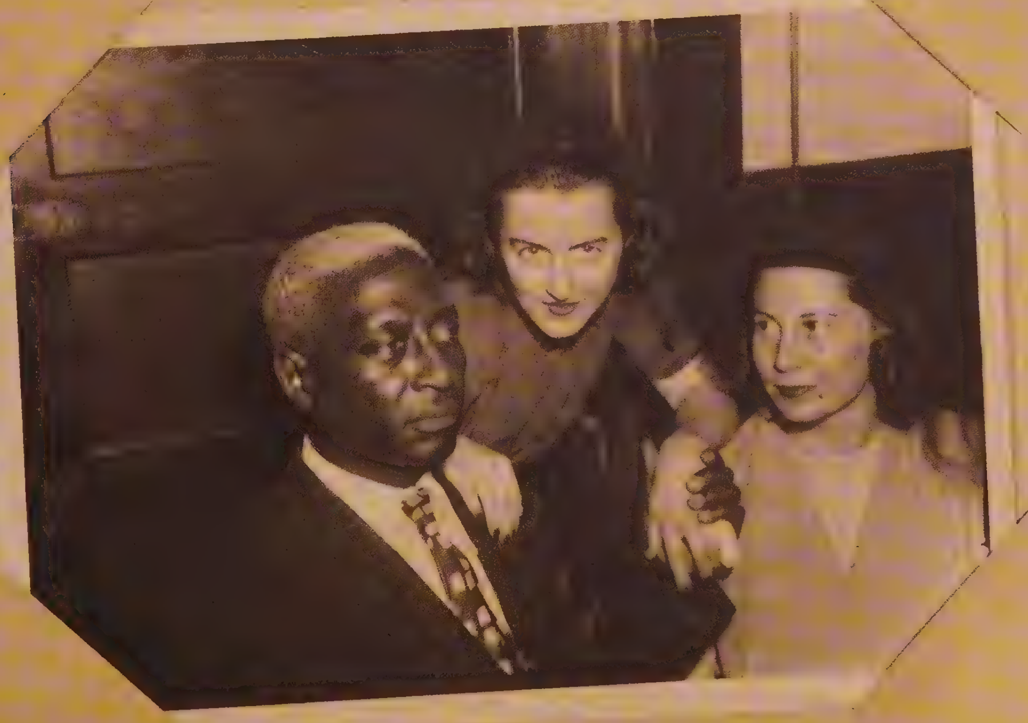


# JACK'S TAVERN

ALROY LOVE - - - - - - MRS. L. B. MURRELL

☆

1931 Sutter Street - - - - - San Francisco, California



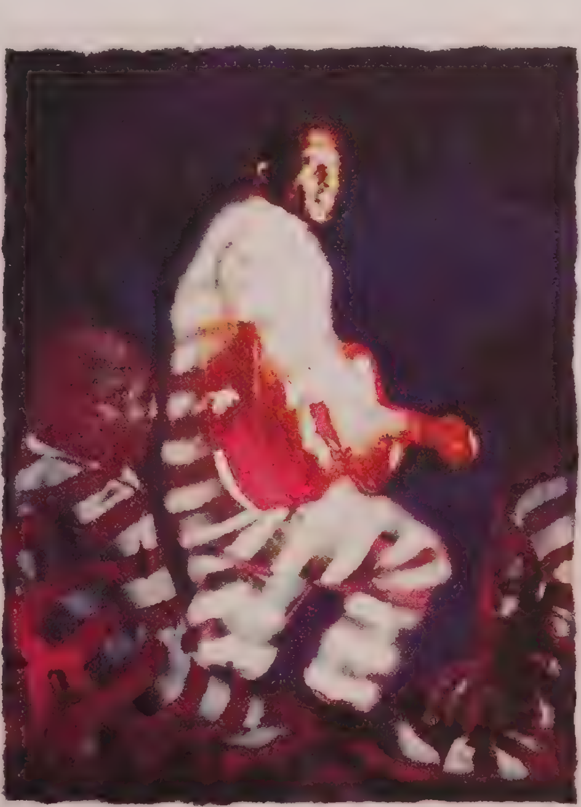
# JAILHOUSE BLUES

*"When a man gets in trouble everybody turns him down."*

In the almost six decades since Lead Belly's death many artists, writers and historians have depicted Lead Belly as the ex-convict who performed sometimes onstage in prison stripes. There was a stigma attached to this uniform at that time thanks to the hugely popular Paul Muni film, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" released in 1932. John Lomax must have thought having Lead Belly appear in prison stripes would be but a further extension of the film's rather tame depiction of chain gang work crews. Prisoners assigned to these crews on public sites were subject to daylong humiliation by both sentries and passing motorists, many with gaping children. Fortunately Lead Belly had his guitar and his creative spirit to keep a more positive mind. So on his release it was more than puzzling to be told by John Lomax to don the dreaded and demeaning prison stripes for public performances. Lead Belly was lauded in the press for having sung his way out of prison — so that's what Lomax felt the people wanted to see — the ex-con who charmed a governor into granting him a pardon.

What has never been told is how embarrassing and degrading Lead Belly found being presented before audiences as a kind of singing ex-con sideshow. He often told my grandmother, Tiny Robinson, of the deep humiliation and embarrassment he felt, especially when paraded in front of young student audiences. At one point he decided he'd had enough. Never again would he allow anyone to present him in these dreaded prison stripes. He did the crime. He served his time. Now it was time to move on. That's why Lead Belly took so much pride in his appearance. He preferred neat suits, vests, starched white shirts with either bow or neckties, pocket handkerchiefs, wing-tips or fancy alligator shoes. He preferred brimmed hats and owned several canes and walking sticks, a wrist and pocket watch as well as several rings. He had his own tuxedo. He was proud of his membership in the Masons and always wore an enameled gold mason pin in his suit lapel.

The "March of Time" film newsreel recreated John Lomax's discovery of Lead Belly in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. It showed an obviously uncomfortable Lead Belly, wearing bold prison stripes and surrounded by a group of



identically clad prisoners, singing "Goodnight, Irene" as well as being interviewed by Lomax. This news film, the first of a series (featuring Lead Belly paired with a rising Adolf Hitler!), was shown in movie theatres across America where it would be seen by millions. This, coupled with the sensational nature of the news accounts heralding Lead Belly's arrival in New York City, only served to spread the gospel of his convict past.

The boldly graphic image to the right by Keith Graves, a popular children's book illustrator and long-time Lead Belly fan, only serves, innocent as it may seem, to reinforce his troubled history. All the elements are there — prison stripes, gun and bloody knife painted on his Stella guitar, chains and shackles around his ankles as he leaps over prison walls. While I'm sure no offense was intended, the damage is still done.

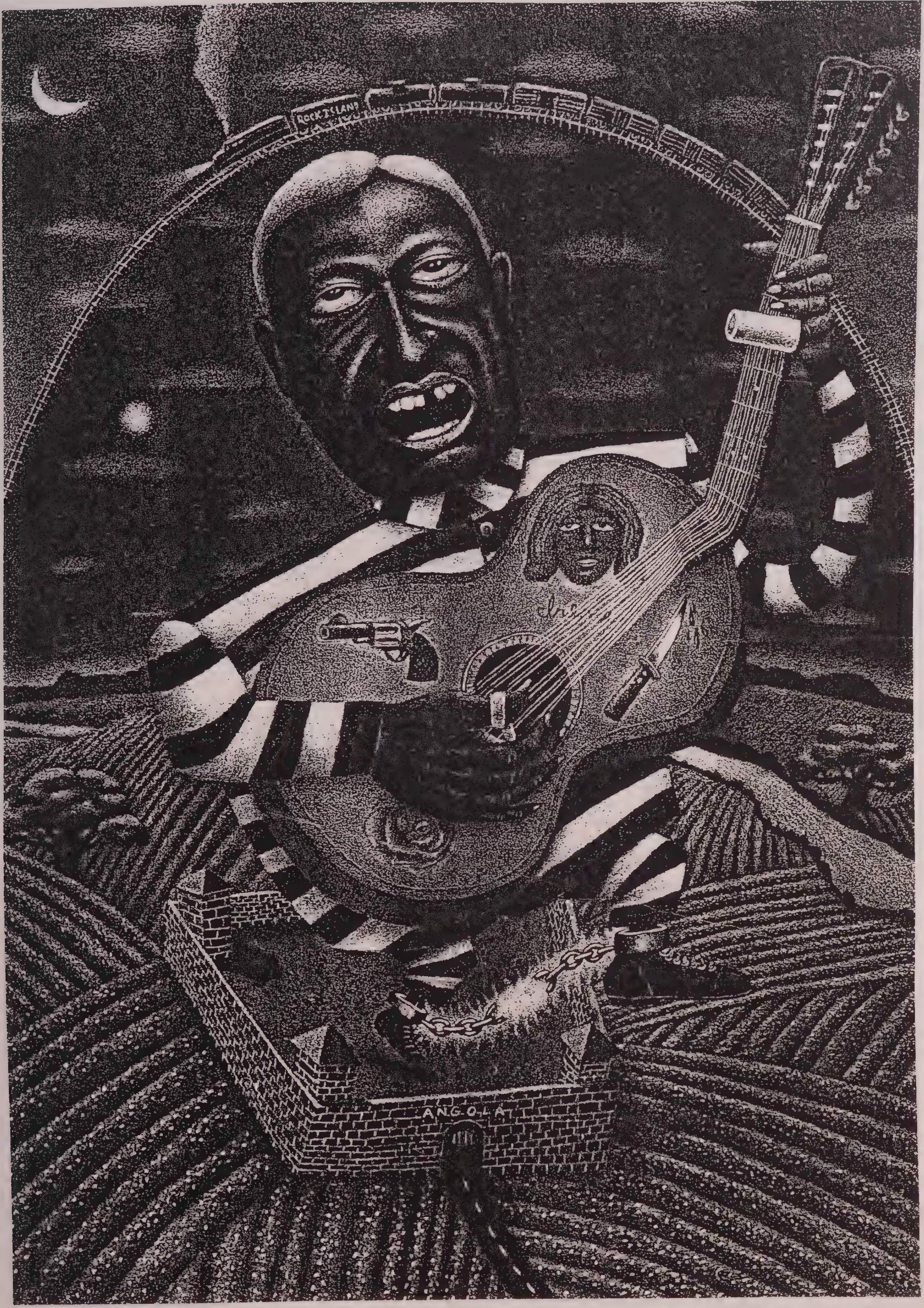
Even the popular House of Blues chain of clubs sees fit to highlight Lead Belly's criminal past rather than his prowess as a blues musician. Their plaster portrait by artist Andrew Wood shows Lead Belly decked out in a nicely tailored suit and bow tie — sporting a big fat prison number over his chest!

Despite popular legend, Lead Belly was not pardoned from prison in either Texas or Louisiana because of any musical plea on his part. He did make such musical requests, one in person to Texas Governor Pat Neff, the other a recorded plea delivered to Louisiana Governor O.K. Allen by John Lomax. But the real reason for Lead Belly's early release from both state penal in stitutions was because he was eligible for early parole either for good behavior or for time already served.

End of story.

**Alvin Singh II,** *is the grandson of Tiny Robinson. He is working on a film documentary about Lead Belly.*

*Sculpture by Andrew Wood at House of Blues*


ROCK ISLAND
ANGOLA

*Keith Graves, illustration for Texas Monthly*

"I can tell you about Angola. I remember the lights burning bright all night, but getting dim and flickering when somebody died in the electric chair."

*Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

t Walter Boyd,
ty Grand Jury or
of Wi[illegible] Staffor
y in B[illegible]e Count
o 20 years in th

the De[illegible]endant
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ense in B[illegible]

## LEAD BELLY

### Lomax Protege Heard Here in Original Composition That Brought 2 Pardons

[illegible]but was

---

### Hand Jive, Dallas 1954

*Lead Belly, Lead Belly,*
*Killed a man*
*Stole his whiskey*
*An' away he ran.*
*Lead Belly, Lead Belly,*
*Back in da' pen*
*Got into trouble*
*When he stab his friend.*
*'ead Belly, Lead Belly,*
*'g and strong,*
*ck behind bars*
*ere he belong.*
*' Belly, bum..bum, bum*
*Belly, bum, bum, bum*
*'elly, bum, bum, bum*
*ad Belly, bum, bum, bum*

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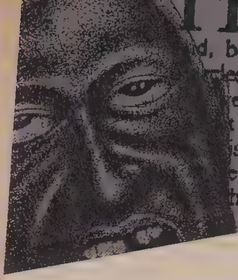

[illegible]) Ledbetter got the nick-
name "Leadbelly," some people
d, because of his powerful stomach
es, impervious to the knife attack
ere frequent in his violent wor
Texas and Louisiana juke joints
sons of the twenties. Others said
about because of his awe
h or because of [illegible]

some
ist-shro
pantheon
self-procl
uitar an
orld. H
as
en
ric

---

slashed an acquaintance 12 times with a long sharp razor,
old Negro was found guilty by a New City jury last week of
he third degree. This would have been a routine case,
at the defendant was Huddie Ledbetter, better known as
elly, a distinguished contributor to the Library of Congress and
s the greatest living Nogro guitarist.
1924 Lead Belly sang himself out of 23 years of a 30-year
s jail sentence for murder by addressing a long, musical plea for a
lon to the state governor. A few years ago he got out of the
uisiana State Penitentary the same way. Meanwhile, he had been
iscovered" by John Lomax, honorary curator of the Congressional
ibrary's Archive of Americ[illegible] Folk Song [illegible]
ncyclopedia [illegible] Negro melody," Lomax excitedly record
193 of Lead belly's songs on acetate discs and sent them to the
Library of Congress.

BAD NIGGER MAKES GOOD MINSTREL

---

## Lead Bel

### Why, He Himself Has
### Way to 2 Prison Par

---

THE PATHFIND
Washington, D.C
May 20, 1939

---

### BACK ON STAGE

**Huddie (Ledbelly) Ledbetter, celebrated master of the 12-string guitar and folk song singer extraordinary, who was cleared recently of blame in the altercation in his (Ledbetter's) home when he was accused of stabbing Henry Burgess, 356 W. 52nd street. Ledbetter said he was trying to keep Burgess from beating his woman companion and in the fight, he, Ledbetter, was badly cut. The guitar and blues ace is due to appear at a Harlem theatre soon.**

---

THESE HANDS ONCE KILLED A MAN

---

"[illegible] entertainer of the even.
E[illegible], world famous singer of [illegible]

Clerk, Bowie County)
exas

escaped convict

caped from N. A. Shaw Farm, De Ka[illegible], Texas

W, THEREFORE, The Board of Prison Commissioners of the Texas
enitentiaries do offer the above reward of $25.00 for the arre
nd delivery of said escaped convict to any authorized officer
he Texas Penitentiaries, or to any jail in the United States,
fter his being identified:
rrest and wire all information to BEN E. CABELL, Chairman
rison Commission, H U N T S V I L L E, Texas: *** *** ***
** *** *** *** *** *** *** *** N RECEIVED.

DESCRIPTION OF

The fo

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## Lomax Arrives WithLeadBelly, Negro Minstrel

### Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes BetweenHomicides

---

the efforts of pioneering Texas [illegible]ologist John A. Lomax.

Ledbetter's history cannot be fully documented. He was born in either East Texas or the Caddo Lake district of Louisiana, probably in 1885. His musical training

[ CONTINUED ON PAGE 252 ]

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## Lead Belly Gives Up 'Sticking' And Writes a Roosevelt Song

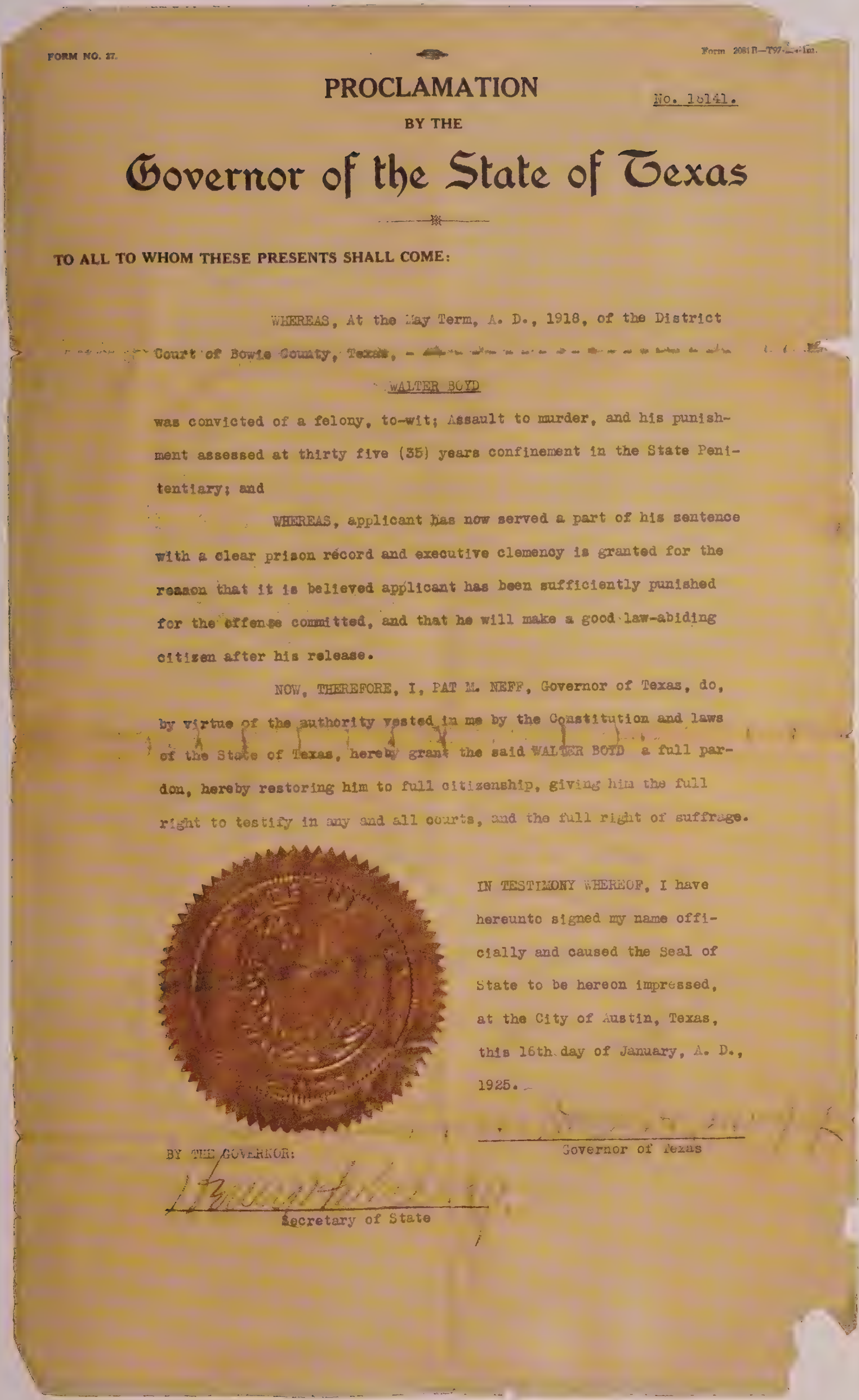
### Negro Minstrel Thinks He's Found Way to Keep Out of Trouble

By JOHN D. MILES.

---

## [illegible] WAS A PITILESS MURDER

**rly Lead Belly enthusiast** was Texas Governor Pat M. Neff who on Jan.
noved to leniency by a musical petition, pardoned the murderous mins
had served 6 years, 7 months and 8 days of a 30-year penitentiary senter



FORM NO. 27.

Form 2081 B—T97-[illegible]m.

## PROCLAMATION

No. 16141.

BY THE

# Governor of the State of Texas

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME:

WHEREAS, At the May Term, A. D., 1918, of the District Court of Bowie County, Texas, - - - - - - - - - - - -

WALTER BOYD

was convicted of a felony, to-wit; Assault to murder, and his punishment assessed at thirty five (35) years confinement in the State Penitentiary; and

WHEREAS, applicant has now served a part of his sentence with a clear prison record and executive clemency is granted for the reason that it is believed applicant has been sufficiently punished for the offense committed, and that he will make a good law-abiding citizen after his release.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAT M. NEFF, Governor of Texas, do, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the State of Texas, hereby grant the said WALTER BOYD a full pardon, hereby restoring him to full citizenship, giving him the full right to testify in any and all courts, and the full right of suffrage.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto signed my name officially and caused the Seal of State to be hereon impressed, at the City of Austin, Texas, this 16th day of January, A. D., 1925.

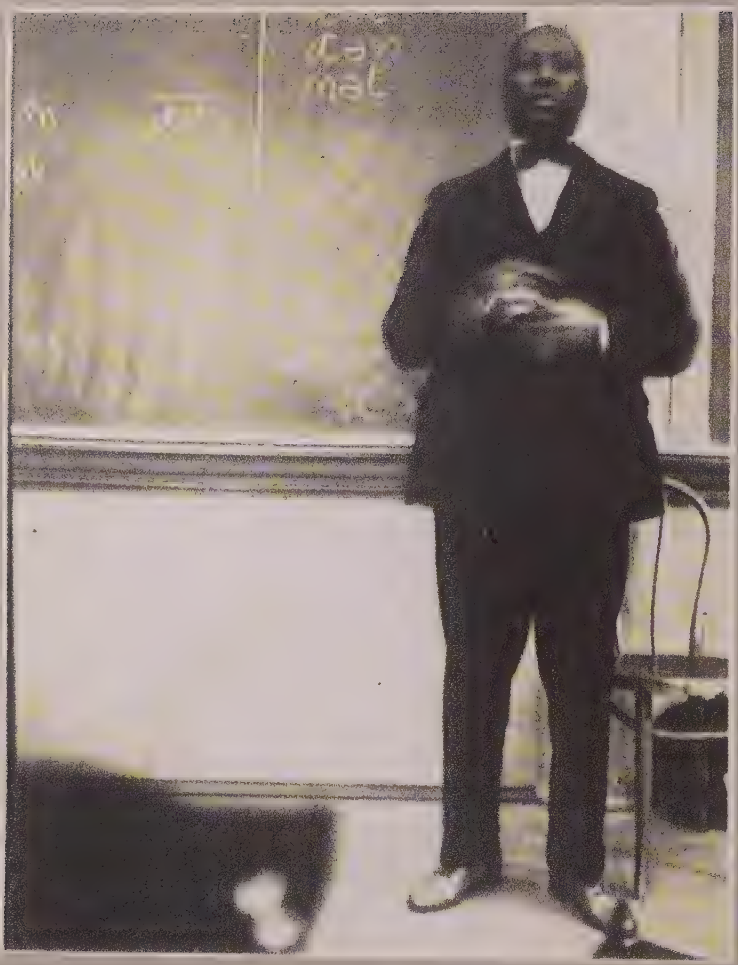
Governor of Texas

BY THE GOVERNOR:

Secretary of State

*Gov. Pat Neff*

Footnote: Texas Governor Pat M. Neff, who granted Lead Belly his first prison pardon in 1925. Twenty years later, when he was president of Baylor University in Waco, Texas, he wrote Lead Belly saying he was happy to have heard good reports of his musical success on the road, adding "...I think you owe to Baylor University, the university to which I am President, should you ever pass this way, to come and give to our students and faculty a free concert."


can
mat

# DEBONAIR LEAD BELLY

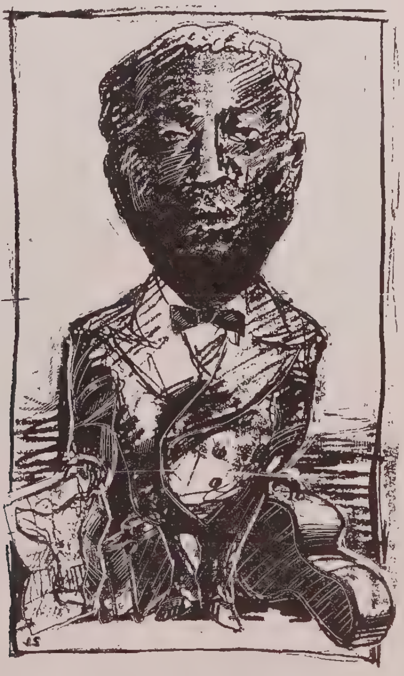
> *"There I was, trying my best to shed my Harvard upbringing, scorning to waste money on clothes other than blue jeans. But Lead Belly always had a clean white shirt and tie, well-pressed suit and shined shoes."*
>
> **Pete Seeger**

## Brownie and Leadbelly: Stipulations and Apprenticeship

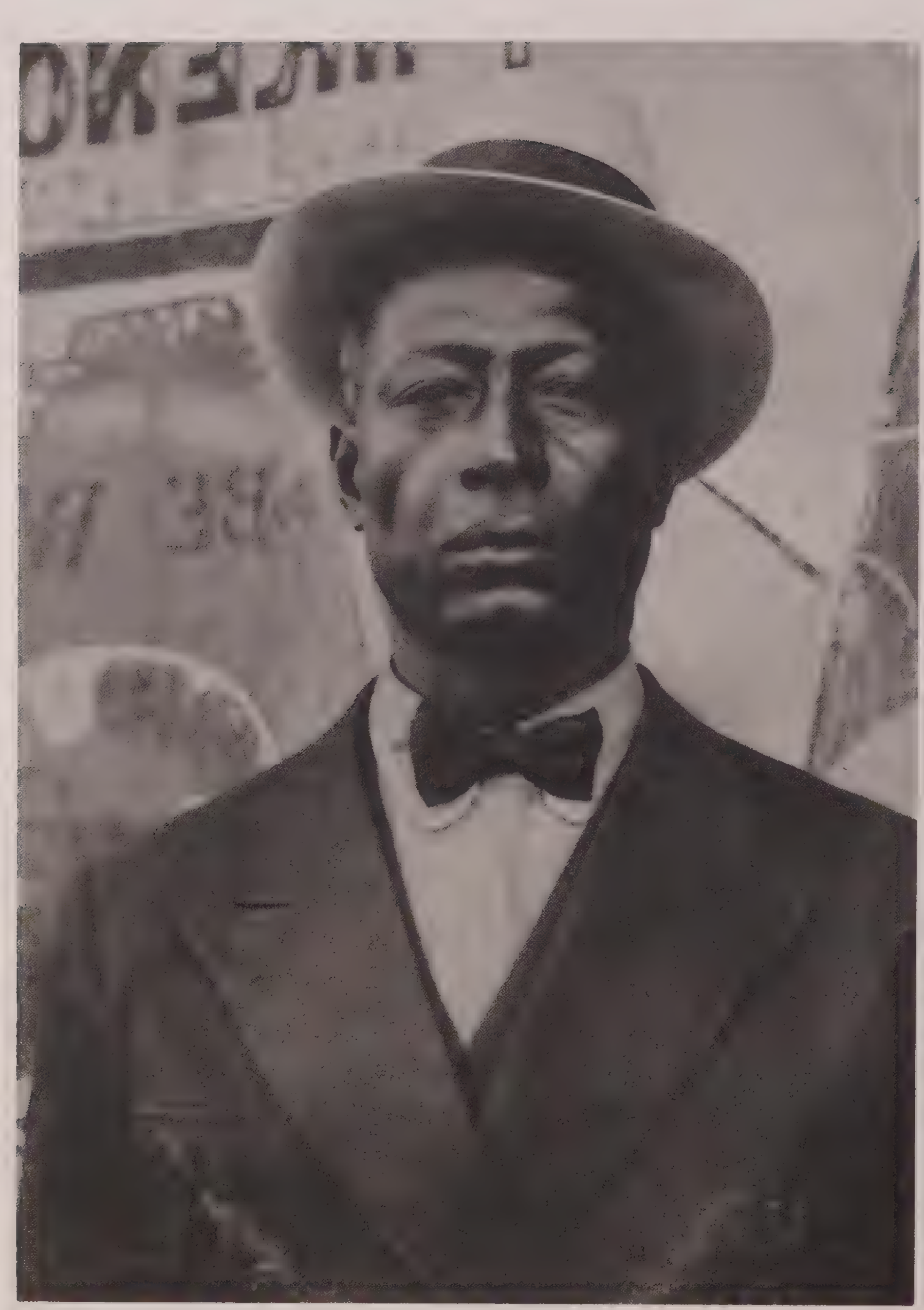
*There were certain stipulations* —some rules I would endure:
*lead wanted* bluesmen dressed proper,
*and I didn't* like wearin' suits that
*want to* be high-class—to
*live*
*up to them* old traditions:

*Your necktie on,* nails all buffed—
*Your shoes shined* clean as church.
*You didn't carry your guitar on your back,* can't tote your stella like a hobo sack,
*you carried it in a case.* cradle her in lush velvet.
*You don't take your coat off onstage* bear a suit stern as a preacher's collar—but
*Lead was* always
*beautiful*
*Neat as a pin,*
*and clean*
*as a brand new bottle*

**Tyehimba Jess**

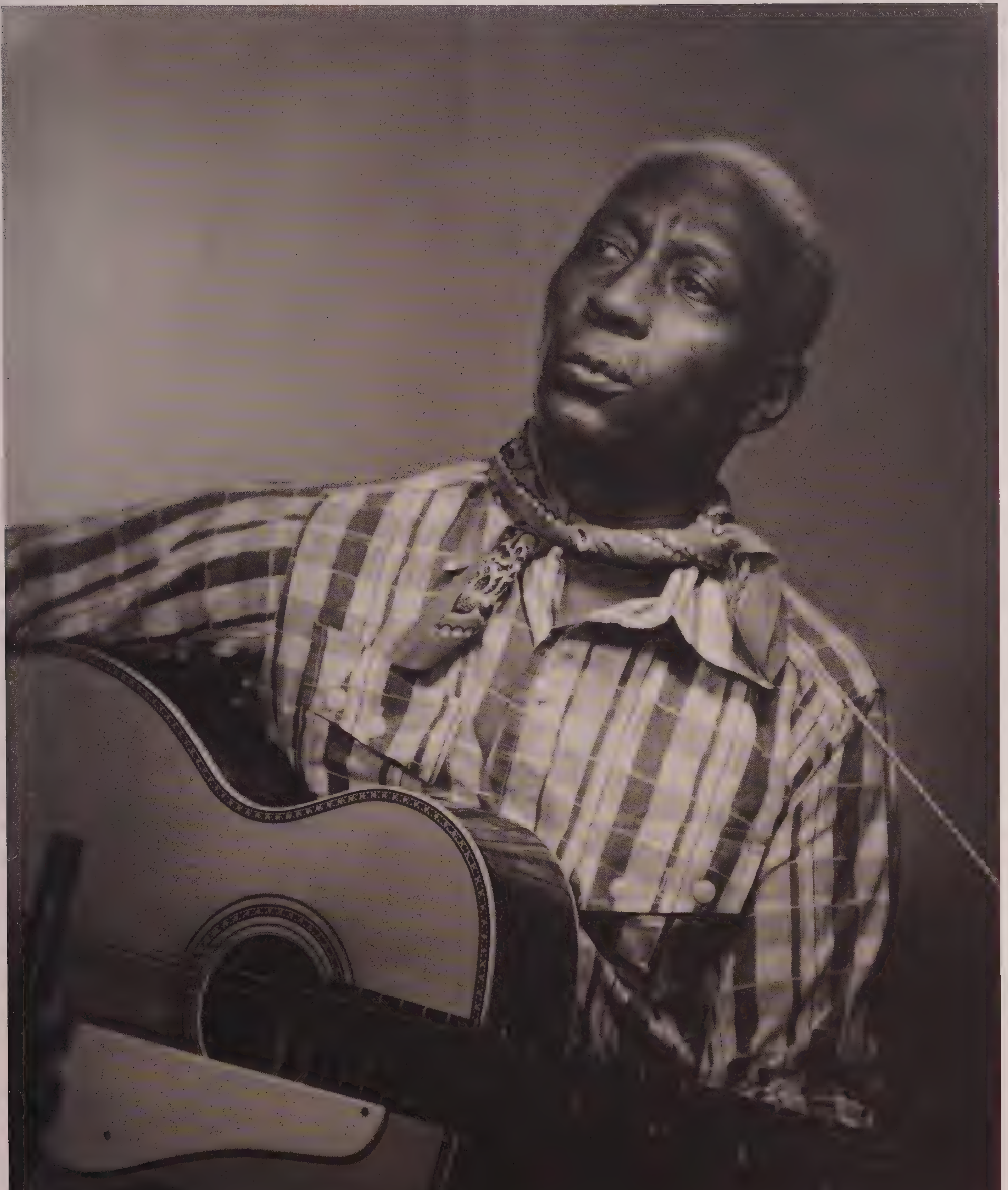


*Jack Sherman*

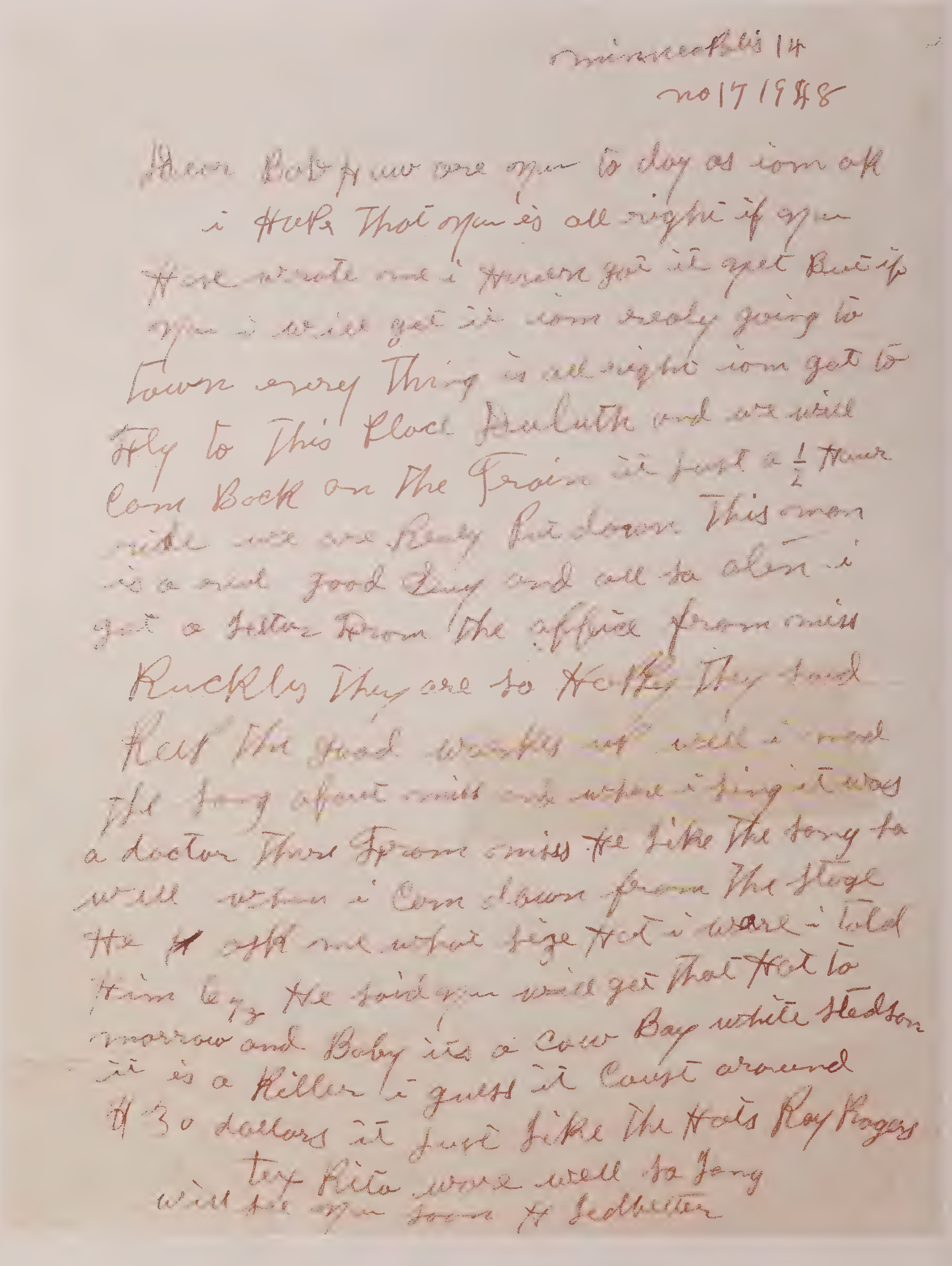


*Lead Belly had a sense of style early on as evidenced by this photo dating back to 1918. It is the earliest photo ever taken of Huddie Ledbetter as a young man known to exist*

*photo by Abe Greiss*

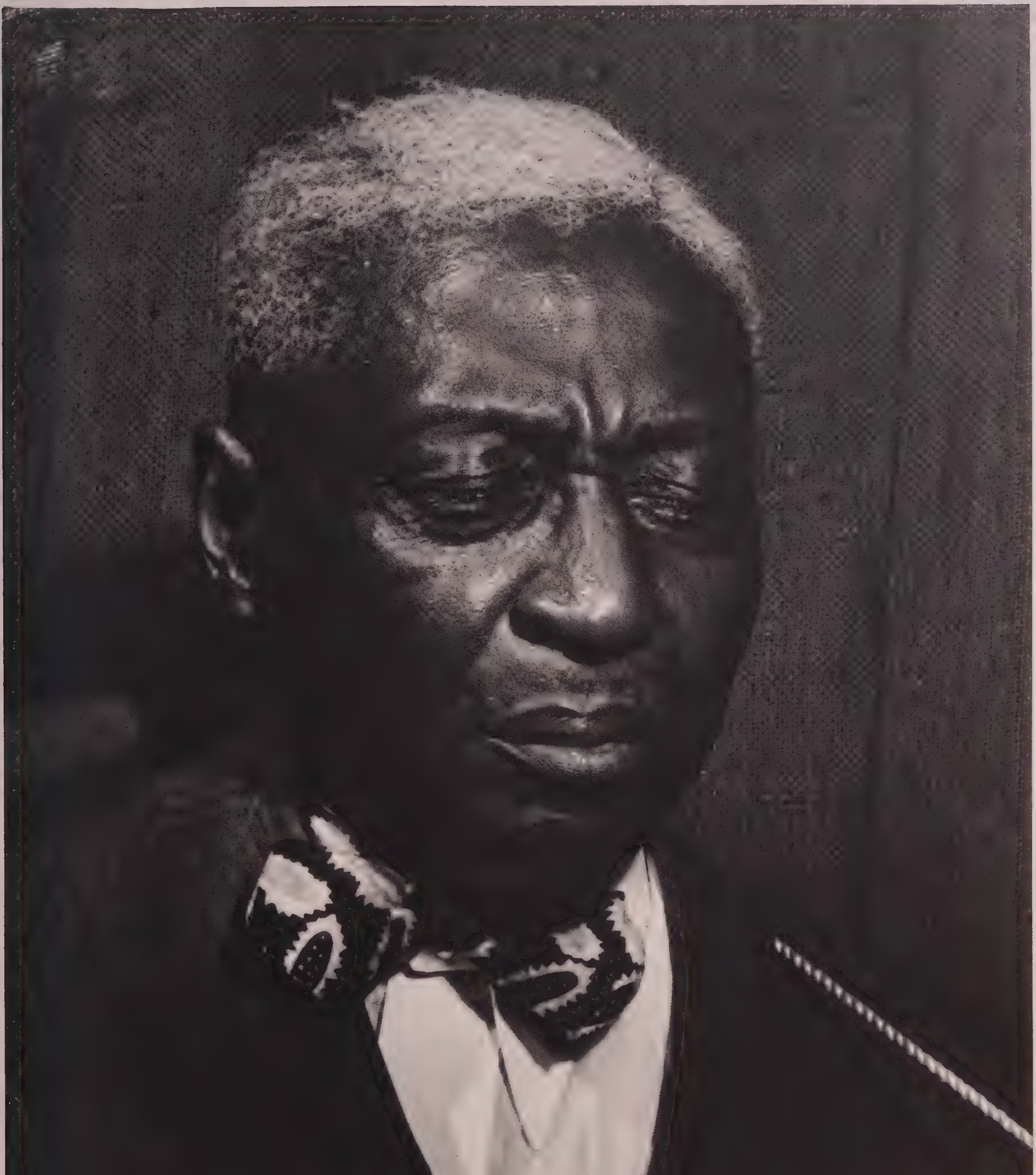


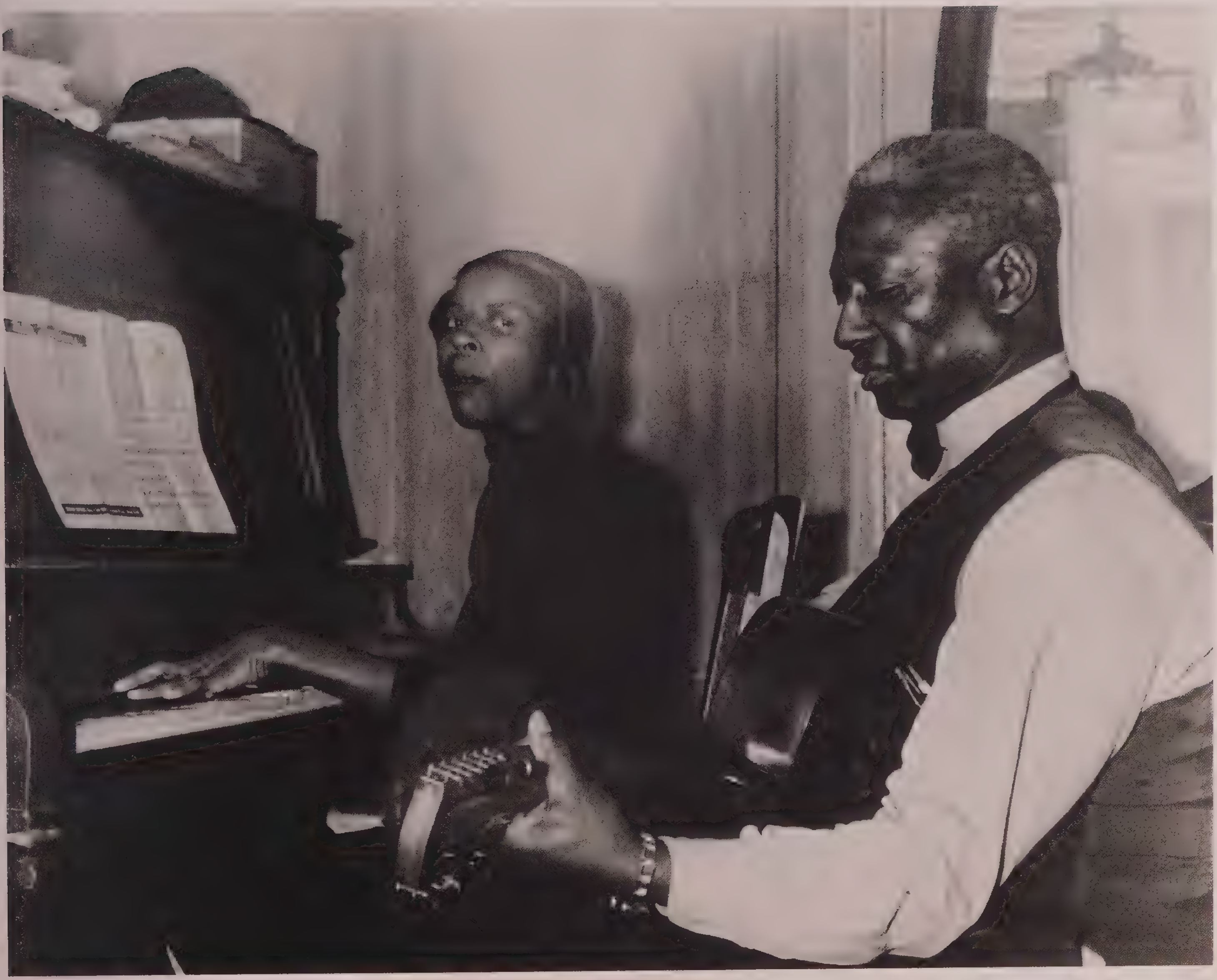
*National Portrait Gallery, photo by Berenice Abbott*



minneapolis 14
no 17 1948

Dear Bob how are you to day as iom ok
i Hope That you is all right if you
Have wrote me i Haven got it yet But if
you i will get it iom realy going to
town every Thing is all right iom got to
Fly to This place Duluth and we will
com Back on The Train it just a ½ Hour
ride we are Ready put down This man
is a real good Guy and all so also i
got a letter from the office from miss
Ruckley They are so Happy They send
Hall The good wishes of well i mad
The song about miss and when i sing it was
a doctor There From miss He like The song so
well when i Com down from The stage
He ask me what size Hat i ware i told
Him 6 7/8 He said you will get That Hat to
morrow and Baby its a Cow Boy white stedson
it is a Killer i guess it Coust around
H 30 dollars it just like The Hats Roy Rogers
tex Rito ware well so long
will see you soon H Ledbetter





*Lead Belly spent long hours playing his guitar at home where friends were always welcome to stop by. Martha frequently accompanied him on the piano in their New York walk-up in the east village, singing harmony on Baptist spirituals they learned as children in Louisiana*

# "IT'S A BOURGEOIS TOWN"

*"Lead Belly believed in himself and openly objected to being denied his rights. He was ahead of his time when it involved his civil rights. Lead Belly made progress for all black people because he stood up for what he felt was right. He wouldn't bow down."*

**Emma Terry**

## Washington, D.C.

"The fact that Lead Belly stood up for his rights frightened white people. It frightened black people, too. When Lead Belly came into prominence and sang in Washington, D.C., he was ostracized by blacks because he wasn't the type of "colored" person they wanted to represent the race. They would have nothing to do with a barroom gambler, ex-con and a murderer. Lead Belly wrote about this particular kind of racism in The Bourgeois Blues:

"Me 'n my wife went all over town, everywhere we go the colored people would turn us down..."

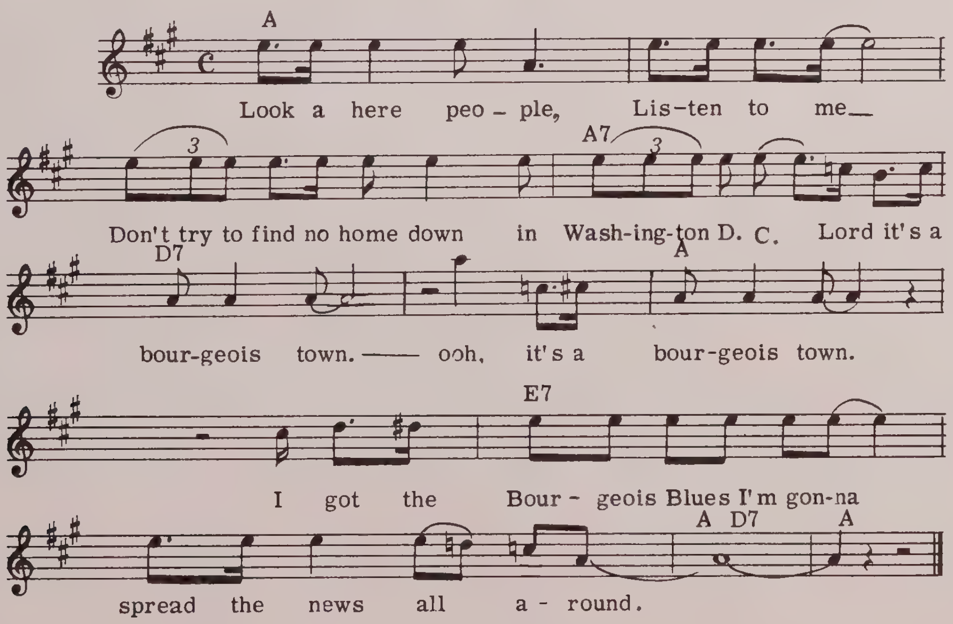
Because Lead Belly did not represent the public image that most black people wanted, they've almost blocked him out of black history."

**Pete Seeger**

*"Lead Belly didn't just remember songs, he absorbed and transformed them in a way that made them essential and timeless. Of all the songs for which he is so well remembered today, it's possible he actually wrote very few himself — perhaps only "Bourgoise Blues" — instead functioning throughout his life as a conduit that carried the music of the land and the small towns and the red-light districts to larger audiences. In part, this is the true entertainer's gift and without question, Lead Belly absolutely understood the art of the entertainer."*

**Roger Hahn**

## Bourgeois Blues


A
Look a here peo - ple, Lis-ten to me
Don't try to find no home down in Wash-ing-ton D. C. Lord it's a
A7
3
D7
bour-geois town. ooh, it's a bour-geois town.
A
I got the Bour - geois Blues I'm gon-na
E7
spread the news all a - round.
A D7 A

Chorus

White folks in Washington, they know
how,
Throw a colored man a nickel to see
him bow.

Chorus

Home of the brave, land of the free -
I don't want to be mistreated by no
bourgeoisie.

*Bourgeois Blues: Words and Music by Huddie Ledbetter, edited with new additional material by Alan Lomax,*
*TRO ©Copyright 1959 (renewed) Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., New York, N.Y.*

# INAUGURAL GALA

E PLURIBUS UNUM

WASHINGTON, D.C., JANUARY 19, 1941

I AM A
YOUNG AMERICAN
for
ROOSEVELT

# LEAD BELLY'S "WINDJAMMER"

> *"Huddie plays a little old $4 squeeze box, and you can actually hear the sad notes of his people singing in the swamps and jungles and echoing in the Louisiana moss. And when you hear it you almost know that it's (the) sad and lonesome music of a people that can't vote."*
>
> **Woody Guthrie**

### Lead Belly and His "Windjammer"

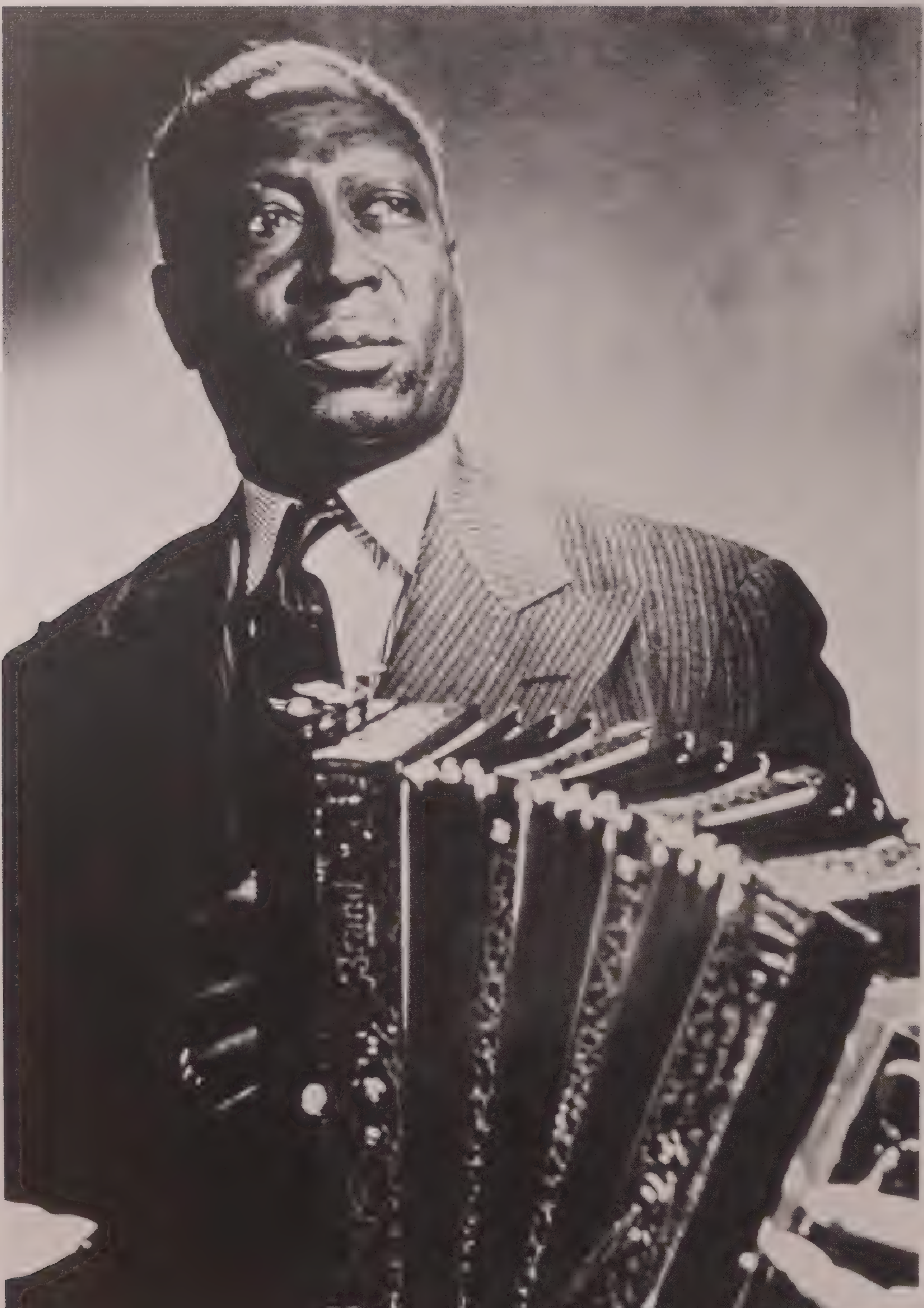
Lead Belly was born in Mooringsport, Louisiana, in Caddo Parish, the same region where an ex-slave named Franklin recalled seeing folks dance "barefoot as de goose" to music of the windjammer. Lead Belly's father made his way to this region after the Civil War and bought a farm along the Texas-Louisiana border, which had a large rural African-American presence in the late nineteenth century and would experience a population explosion in the early twentieth century when oil was discovered there.

Like Franklin, Lead Belly remembered dances witnessed as a child in Caddo Parish. In his interviews with Alan Lomax (now housed in the Library of Congress), he called these dances "sukey jumps" and referred to the accordion as the "windjammer". Like Franklin, he described fiddles and accordions as part of the standard instrumentation for the dance bands of his youth; he included guitars, however, rather than the banjos that Franklin remembered from the slave era, in that instrumentation. Lead Belly also recalled dancers performing set dances to instructions given by a caller. Attending sukey jumps might have prompted Lead Belly to want to play the accordion in his youth, or he might have been tempted by the fact that his friends played accordions. Whatever the motivation, Margaret Coleman, his childhood sweetheart, reported that "early on he talked to his parents about getting him some kind of instrument so he could learn music." His second cousin, Irene Campbell, recalled her grandmother telling her that "he would sit in his little rocking chair. His feet could not touch the ground, but he could play tunes on the accordion and mandolin."

Lead Belly's Uncle Terrell returned from Mooringsport, Mississippi, one evening and gave the seven year-old Lead Belly his first musical instrument, a windjammer. Lead Belly continued this story himself in an earlier account and explained, "I was settin' on the porch when my Uncle Terrell came ridin' up, an when he gave it to me I was so glad I actually jump up and shout. Den I turn aroun an' get on that thing an' begin to whip it down. I set up an' played dat accordion all night long. Once in a while papa, he would raise up and say, 'Son, aincha fixin' to lie down?' But I was a-whipping it down to the groun'. I kep' on like that till I was as good as they had on a windjammer."

Almost every book that mentions his performance on the instrument has asserted that Lead Belly's accordion style was influenced by the Acadian tradition of southern Louisiana. The Acadian connection was initially suggested by John Lomax in his biography of the bluesman, and it has been repeated verbatim in later writings. Lead Belly volunteered the following illuminating comments to Gordon Parks, "The Louisiana French people liked the windjammer, but us Negroes liked the guitar better. I just played it safe and played them both."

In this context, Lead Belly's reference to "the Louisiana French people" might refer not to the Cajuns, but to French-speaking African-Americans located on the Cane River area of west central Louisiana, which is some distance from Caddo Parish.



H. Ledbetter

There is no evidence of Lead Belly visiting this or other heavily Cajun-influenced areas during his youth. A Cajun influence upon Lead Belly's accordion playing would seem unlikely also from the standpoint of chronology. It is believed that the diatonic accordion was introduced into Cajun culture around 1890 to 1910. By that time Lead Belly was absorbing local African-American traditions in non-Cajun Caddo Parish.

Lead Belly remembered that he could play a crude version of "There's No Cornbread Here" on the accordion by the morning after he received the instrument from his uncle. The next tune he learned was a jig called "Diana Got A Wooden Leg", which his mother taught him. She also taught him some of the Negro spirituals she sang in church but, unfortunately, he never recorded any of them. Other pieces that he recalled learning during his youth were "Going to Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In", "Green Corn", "Poor Howard", "Yellow Gal", "Skip to My Lou" and "Corn Bread Rough" which he later recorded twice on the accordion. "Sukey Jump", "Laura" and "John Hardy", three other tunes he would record on the accordion, also probably date from his early period.

Lead Belly quickly learned the tunes in demand at the dances he played for. He described these dances as follows: "No white man in twenty miles....I got fifty cents a night, and I played sukey jumps when I was fifteen years old because I had a horse and I could go out and ride." News spread of his playing, and he became a popular performer at sukey jumps held in the Lake Caddo area by 1903.

Although Lead Belly never identified an accordionist who directly influenced his playing, he regularly mentioned his guitar-playing uncles, Terrell and Bob, as primary influences upon his musical development. His Uncle Terrell, in fact, also gave him his first guitar when he was fourteen. Lead Belly continued playing the accordion at dances at least till he was sixteen, although he had already begun to integrate the guitar into his performance by that time.

Lead Belly never mentioned whether he took his accordion with him when he left the Lake Caddo area. He used the instrument between 1901 and 1917 while working in Dallas, Texas, where he performed with his fellow bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson (ca. 1897–1930). In their collaborations, Jefferson played an open-tuned guitar with a slide, which he called the "Hawaiian guitar", and Lead Belly supplied the accompaniment, usually on the accordion or mandolin. Lead Belly also organized a band around this time to serenade the more proper neighborhoods of Dallas, and he often used the accordion, along with the mandolin and guitar, with this group.

The guitar eventually became the dominant accompanying instrument for Lead Belly, however, even during his days in Dallas. This reflected trends that were taking place in the early 1900s in African-American folk-oriented dance music, when older set dances began to fall out of favor and newer dances began to replace them. The instrumentation of fiddles, banjos and accordions that musicians had used to accompany the older of dances began to be exchanged for the piano and guitar. Lead Belly's skill as a guitarist sustained him professionally from about 1910 on.

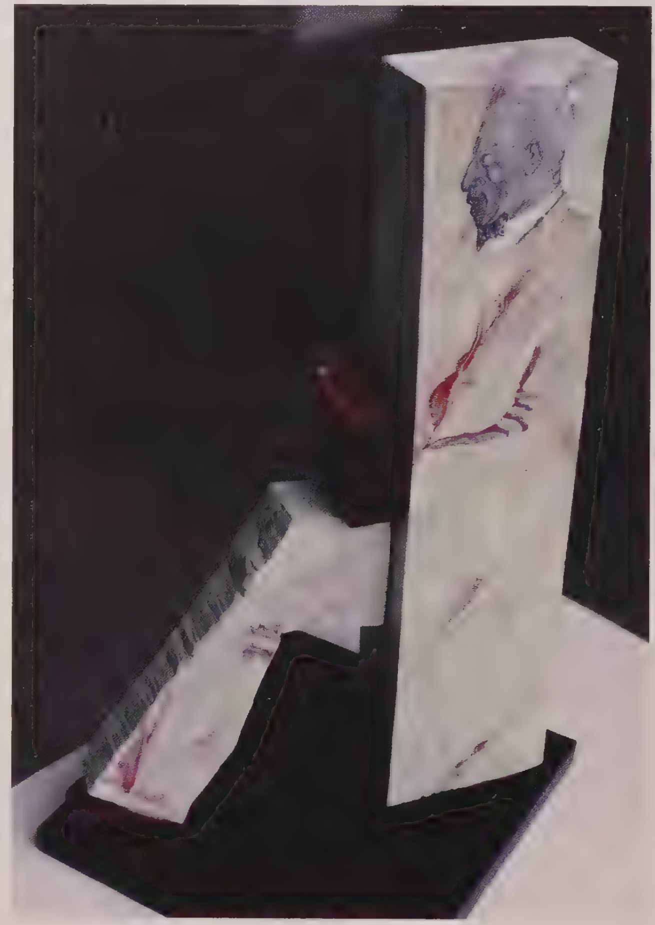
His musical career came to a halt temporarily in 1918 with his conviction for murder, when he began serving time for what would be the first of two prison sentences for felonies (first in the Texas State Prisons, 1918–25, and then at the Angola State Prison in Louisiana, 1930–1934). There is no evidence of his playing the accordion during these incarcerations. During the summer of 1933, John and Alan Lomax heard him sing and play the guitar — but not the accordion.

We encounter reference to a concertina being among Lead Belly's possessions at the end of his concert tour with John Lomax in 1935. That instrument most certainly must have been a button accordion, for no other documentation has been found that records Lead Belly's expression of interest in the concertina. (Mainline folklorists tend to confuse the accordion with the concertina.) Moreover, recording sessions where he is listed as a concertinast were certainly occasions where he played the diatonic accordion.

While Lead Belly seldom used the accordion in concert appearances during the 1940s, he is known to have posed with it for a series of promotional photographs (now in the Library of Congress) taken while he was in Los Angeles in 1944.

Lead Belly recorded a total of four different tunes on the accordion: "Corn Bread Rough" on two separate occasions (1942, 1944), "John Hardy" (ca. 1943), "Laura" (ca. 1947) and "Sukey Jump" (ca. 1947). Only one tune on the accordion was recorded at each session.

Between March 1935 and March 1936 (before Lead Belly resettled in New York), he was at times quite destitute and might have had to sell his accordion. According to Tiny Robinson, Lead Belly's niece, the accordion he had in the late 1940s disappeared from his apartment shortly after his death in 1949. With Lead Belly went the best source



*Wood Sculpture, Åke Pallarp*

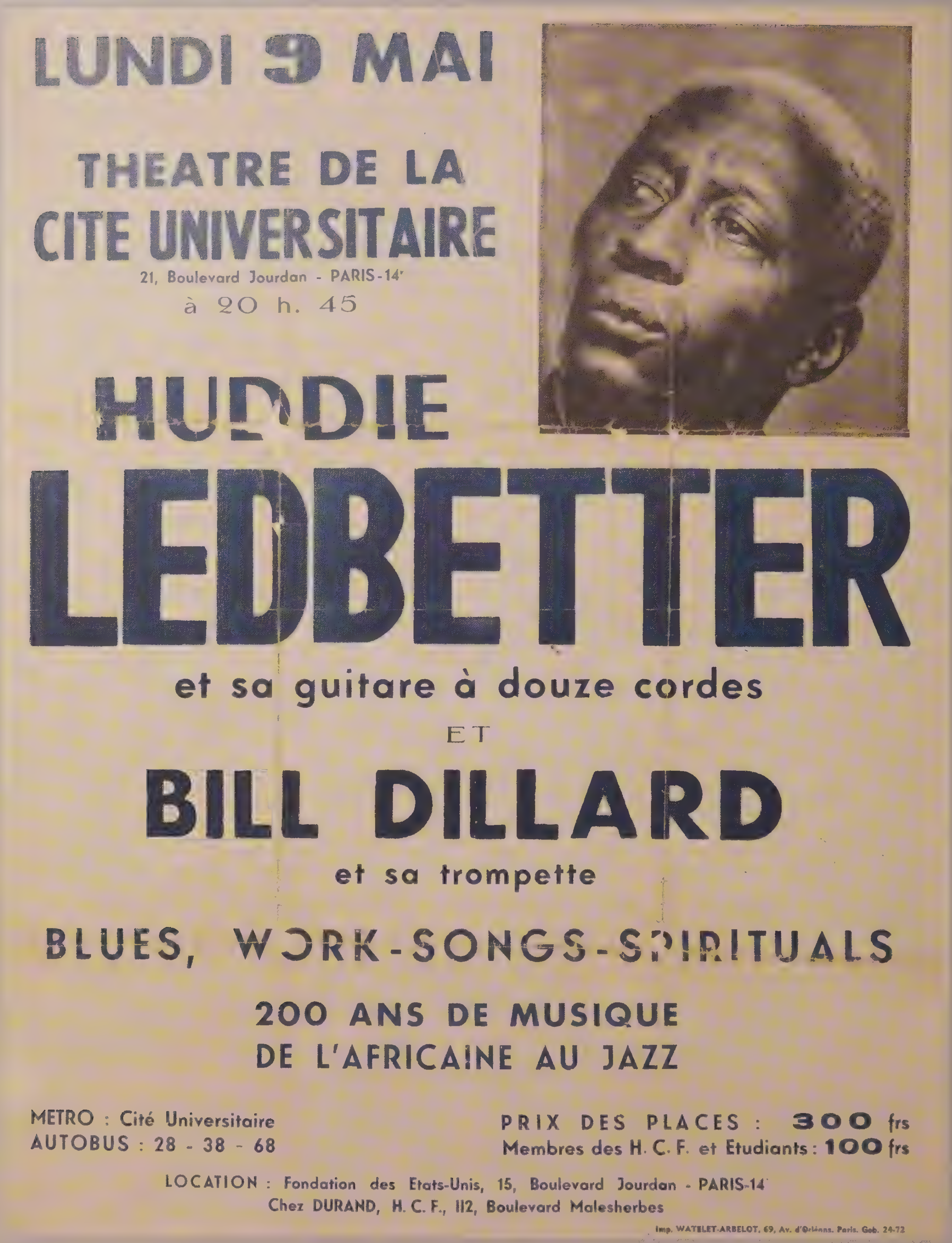
of information about his accordion playing. Very little information has surfaced despite numerous books and articles published on the subject since.

Lead Belly left us the best examples of a true turn-of-the-century music that has slipped past folklorists and producers of regional recording sessions. Of the handful of other African-American accordionists who have recorded, only Blind Jesse Harris has equaled the standards of musicianship reflected on Lead Belly's recordings. Although this style of accordion playing was admittedly a minor musical tradition in rural black America, Lead Belly's recordings should be seen as a cornerstone for our understanding of that tradition.

The accordion was the first mass-produced, factory built instrument that was loud, durable and portable. Though it was not cheap, it was less expensive than pianos and guitars. The fact that it was adopted by black musicians contributes insight into a neglected strand of African-American music history. No tradition that produced excellent work from a master musician of Lead Belly's caliber is, in final analysis, unimportant.

**Jared Snyder**

*Courtesy of Tiny Robinson*



# LUNDI 9 MAI

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et sa guitare à douze cordes

ET

# BILL DILLARD

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# LEAD BELLY IN EUROPE

*"When he was just about to sing, Lead Belly would sit very still and be ever so quiet. He explained: I'm thinking in my heart."*

**J. A. Lomax**

Lead Belly reached Europe in 1938, a full decade before his 1949 Paris appearance. In the fall of 1938, Felix Green, a BBC journalist based in New York recorded more than a dozen Lead Belly tracks. Greene thereupon transferred the music to London where it was safeguarded until its recent reaquisition by the Lead Belly Society. A half dozen additional cuts recorded in the V-Disc Series in New York in the early '40s were also transferred to BBC London and sequestered.

Max Jones wrote in his 1946 *Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter* that "American readers may wonder at the interest shown in Ledbetter's singing and playing by enthusiasts who, in the main, are unable to buy any of his records. The fact is, his voice has quite often been heard over the air in such BBC recorded programmes as 'America Sings' [Sep. 7, 1944] and WNYC's 'American Music' and 'Radio Rhythm Club' which has repeatedly introduced Lead Belly's records into blues programmes..."

Jones continued to write about Lead Belly for the next thirty years, and was undoubtedly the most prolific and enthusiastic of Lead Belly's European critics.

Others were writing about Lead Belly and reviewing his recordings even though they were unavailable in England at the time. Stanly Dance, Albert McCarthy, Charles Wilford, Denis Preston, and Roger Pryor Dodge contributed to Jones' 1946 *Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter* with McCarthy writing that Lead Belly's "significance lies in the fact that when he poses before white America the plight of his race, it is a dreadful challenge that he utters." Albert McCarthy and Fred Ramsey, Jr. also provided an extensive six-page discography of Lead Belly's recordings. In 1946 Charles Harvey wrote in the London *Jazzology,* (and included a discography), that Lead Belly possessed "great musical talent and one of the most astonishing memories this side of Toscanini."

In the spring of 1949 many American jazz artists headed for Paris for the grand festival. Some were expatriot legends like Sidney Bechet, others were budding artists like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Lead Belly also traveled to Paris. To some extent his fame preceeded him because of critical writing in London over the previous few years, because of the increasing play and availability of his records, and because of the high regard held for him by other professionals with Louisiana roots like Sidney Bechet and Hot Lips Page.

Paris was a triumph and success because it introduced Lead Belly and his music to a greater array of Europeans. It primed the way for the enthusiastic receptions which Josh White, Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters received in Europe over the next few years. Pierre Artis reviewed Lead Belly's concert in *La Revue Du Jazz* with positive comments about the range of his repertoire.

In the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune,* the "Mostly About People" column noted Lead Belly's "considerable contributions to American music", archived at the Library of Congress and at Columbia University. A few months later the Danish discographer, Erik Widermann, authored an

< *Courtesy of Tiny Robinson*

extensive Lead Belly discography in *Jazz Hot,* published in Paris.

In early 1950, Harald Grut wrote a full obituary on Lead Belly in Sweden's *Orkester Journalen* which extolled his achievements in music. A few years later Jorgen Grunnet Jepsen, writing in the same publication, spoke of Lead Belly and his position among musical greats.

Also during the early '50s, the English press continued to issue critical writing on Lead Belly's music. Not only Max Jones' articles in *Melody Maker* but Erik Wiedermann and Helene Chmura of Columbia Records regularly updated *Discophile* readers with news of Lead Belly's recordings. Albert McCarthy and Mike Wyler in a 1956 *Jazz Monthly,* published a discography, clarifying the muddled twenty-year history of Lead Belly's records, issued in America and abroad.

A 1953 biographical entry in German on Lead Belly appeared in Wolfgang Laade's *Jazz-Lexikon.* A few years later a more critical piece on Lead Belly with discography was written by Bert Rehnberg for *Jazz Podium,* published in Vienna. German articles and biographical entries on Lead Belly have appeared with increasing frequency over the forty-five years since his death. Alfons Dauer, Bruno Knobel, Carlo Bohlander, Dieter Mull, Roland Hertlein, Rainer Bratfisch, Victor Grossman, Bernhard Hefele, Klaus Kuhnke are but some of the contributors. More substantive pieces on Lead Belly have appeared in Andre Asriel's 1977 *Jazz* and Thomas Rothschild's *Political Music* in 1984. Both of these German volumes accept the fact of Lead Belly's musical pre-eminence and use him as an example to support their respective arguments. An important work on Lead Belly is reported to be in progress by Berliner Michael Klose.

Italian articles on Lead Belly and his musical output have been written by Nestor R. Ortiz Oderico in a 1964 piece, "Ricardo di Leadbelly", in Milan's *Musica Jazz.* A larger, more analytical article by Gian Carlo Testoni appeared in the same journal a year later. A 1977 *Stereoplay* piece by Nicola Raffone reviewed the '60s folk revival and '70s rock scene in terms of Lead Belly's cornerstone position. In 1983 Roberto Caselli published a historical review of Lead Belly's life and a number of his most famous songs in a new music magazine from Milan.

From Paris in 1969 Benoit Leroux penned a long article in *Jazz Hot,* titled "Blues Rural" where he offered that blues were a consequence of U.S. class structure of which racism is a prime element. Lead Belly's songs were used to illustrate Leroux's arguments. *Jazz Magazine's* 200th issue in 1972 carried a cover portrait of Lead Belly with Philippe Carles asking if the blues were obsolete. Carles cited Lead Belly's music as evidence of the universality and eternalness of the blues.

Gerard Herzhaft published his *Nouvelle Encyclopedie Du Blues* in 1984 and the entry on Lead Belly went well beyond the usual. It explained Lead Belly in comparison with others and the musical influence he exerted.

Also during the '60s, '70s, '80s, critical articles on

Lead Belly ran in the British press. G.E. Lambert wrote "Lead Belly the Demoniac" in a 1964 *Jazz Journal* issue. He noted the fashionable reception of Lead Belly's music during the prior 20 years. Lambert hoped that the broad range of Lead Belly's music would be appreciated, and not narrowed and trapped in the folk revival. In 1968 Tony Wilson wrote a comparative article, "The Folksingers", in *Melody Maker* which was followed in 1969 by a *Jazz Journal* record review of a new Storyville Special release. The enthusiastic reviewer [D. S-B.] wrote "when some of the present crop of singers have been forgotten I like to think that Lead Belly will once again take his rightful place among the giants of our music." Eddie Lambert also reviewed this Lead Belly release in *Jazz Monthly* with similar excitement, and noted that Paul Oliver had written the sleeve notes.

For forty years Paul Oliver had written extensively and commandingly on the blues. Oliver's work had been less individualistic in terms of Lead Belly than that of Max Jones. Oliver's criticism was extraordinarily well informed and therefore helpful for all readers, not just those in England. Oliver's 1964 article, "Blues and the Folk Revival," revealed the standard Lead Belly had established for blues music and the relationship subsequent forms of music had with this standard. Oliver ranked Lead Belly as "mighty" with "many-sided talents and inexhaustible repertoire."

A half century of British writing about Lead Belly has had the effect of re-introducing him to new generations. The 1992 Lead Belly biography by Wolfe and Lornell was published in late 1993 in England by Secker and Warburg, and was well received.

There are fans of Lead Belly's music in eastern Europe. Inquiries have reached the Lead Belly Society which indicate that some of the Lead Belly programming carried by Radio Free Europe, the BBC, and U.S. Armed Forces Radio was heard. It is to be expected that within a few years a body of critical writing on Lead Belly, not unlike that of western Europe will be forthcoming. The spreading of Lead Belly's music will be greatly helped by the recent release in Vienna of a twelve CD set of all of Lead Belly's Library of Congress recordings on the Document (DLP 601-612) label.

As Lead Belly said on his trip to Europe in 1949 as he sat in a cafe appreciating the tranquil view of St-Germain-des-Près, "Paris is a new world to me."

**Sean Killeen**

# PARIS

*"C'est bon, brouillés. C'est bon, brouillés.*
*Tous les jours! C'est bon, c'est bon, c'est bon."*
**Lead Belly**

In May 1949, Lead Belly went to Paris and interrupted his college touring. This opportunity to go abroad had developed fairly quickly but he seized at the chance it represented. In the last few days of April, Lead Belly returned from upstate New York where he had played a pair of long-booked concerts at Alfred University. For June and July he was set to play at a number of mid- and southwest colleges.

A few month earlier Lead Belly had signed a new management agreement with Marjorie Fairbanks and her twenty-year-old son, Austen Fairbanks. Two decades earlier Marjorie Fairbanks had been part of a literary circle at Harvard which included the then unpublished novelist, Thomas Wolfe. She subsequently spent all the rest of her life writing a biography of Wolfe.

The Fairbanks believed that Lead Belly's considerable talent demanded better direction than he had been receiving from his agent, Austin Wilder Management. A number of organizational and promotional measures like bringing Lead Belly's musician union dues up-to-date, and developing publicity photographs and press releases, were instituted by the Fairbanks. Performances at Harvard, Swarthmore, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and a big, summer recording session at the Library of Congress were in various stages of planning.

Marjorie Fairbanks believed that her investment in bringing the art of Lead Belly to the recognition of a wider audience, as well as a return on the funds she was up-fronting, would be realized. She engaged Bill Dillard, who was then playing at the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn, to accompany Lead Belly to Paris, and as an accompanist on muted trumpet. Dillard was a professional jazzman who had recorded with Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and Benny Carter. He had toured with Luis Russell's band, and had lived in Paris in the '30s.

Before their TWA flight to Paris on May 4, while the Fairbanks were arranging passports and travel details, Bill Dillard visited the Ledbetter apartment to get to know and practice with Lead Belly. Dillard had grown up in Philadelphia but his parents were from North Carolina. His mother was part Choctaw as Lead Belly's mother was part Cherokee. And Lead Belly's style of guitar playing was much like the playing of Dillard's father.

On the flight over Dillard recalled Lead Belly being a "bit nervous, but it was his first flight, and his arthritis was acting up." Mid-Atlantic Lead Belly composed a song which Bill Dillard fondly remembers to this day for it epitomized the kindness and quality of Lead Belly's personality:

"Bill and I left New York on the 4th of May;
The plane we were riding was the TWA."

The weather in Paris was beautiful and many fans and musicians had arrived for the Jazz Festival organized by Hughe Panasse. The Fairbanks maintained an apartment in Paris on Rue Wilhem, and had set more than a month-long schedule of events for Lead Belly and Dillard. But circumstances beyond everyone's control conspired to prevent everyone — Lead Belly, Dillard, Fairbanks — from reaching their goals.

< *Bill Dillard with Lead Belly, Cité Universitaire, Paris 1949, Max Jones Archive*

On Friday evening, May 6, a sitting Lead Belly with Bill Dillard standing behind him, sang nineteen songs at a *Soiree Musicale.* The guests were there by engraved invitation and the printed programs showed a tree labeled Ledbetter with branches marked blues, hollers, ballads, etc. Inside the formal program, explanations in French of the meaning of Lead Belly's songs, 'Irene', 'Midnight Special', 'Boll Weevil', etc., were provided. There were no reviews of his private recital, but Lead Belly sang his new TWA song, and got the group to join in with him in singing 'We're In the Same Boat Brother.' However, Bill Dillard noticed that Lead Belly seemed to be weakening day by day. He could not stand and perform, nor could he walk easily.

The Paris newspapers, both French and English language, carried advertisements for the public concert at the Theatre de la Cité Universitaire. All the newspaper publicity like the program at the May 6 *Soiree* failed to use the name 'Lead Belly' and referred to him as Huddie Ledbetter which was not his customary billing. Lead Belly's concert site was on the outskirts of Paris while the majority of Jazz Festival musicians were playing in central Paris. These two elements insured a small audience of about thirty fans, although a contingent of Londoners were quite pleased with the show. Bill Dillard was saddened because he fully realized as a result of the show that Lead Belly was very ill.

The concert at Cité Universitaire was recorded and it was a good session with a very responsive audience. During sound checks before the performance, the recording engineer could not identify or locate a 'clicking, tapping' noise. Bill Dillard recalled that the sound was caused by Lead Belly's uncontrolled ring finger on his right hand hitting the strike plate of his guitar. Dillard immediately understood the significance of this; he knew they could not tour and they would not be stopping in London.

Marjorie Fairbanks had arranged for Lead Belly to appear at Mr. Feral Benga's Club whom she understood was "the most distinguished colored musical man in Paris." Lead Belly did not want to go there, knowing he had very little in common with the mostly African clientele of this night spot. Over the next few days Lead Belly visited the clinic of Dr. Dax for testing. A diagnosis of ALS was reported to the Fairbanks and a letter was sent to Lead Belly's wife in New York explaining why the European tour had to be terminated.

It is not clear if Dr. Dax ever specifically explained the nature of the illness to Lead Belly. There was a practice then to spare a dying patient the gruesome details of his grave future.

Also there was still scant knowledge about the implications of ALS even though baseball great Lou Gehrig, whose name was associated with the disease, had died in 1941. In any event Bill Dillard remembered that Lead Belly had known that he was 'slipping'

CHANEL
PARIS

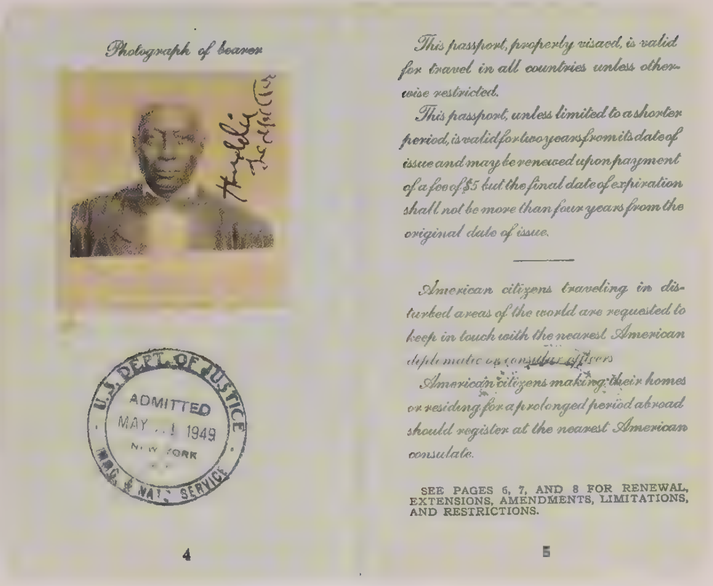
*The bottle of Chanel No. 5 Lead Belly brought back from Paris for Martha* before they even reached Paris; he knew his condition was critically serious because of the cancellation of the tour. Marjorie Fairbanks felt Lead Belly knew he was very ill and the thought of being crippled really tormented him.

On May 31, 1949 Lead Belly and Bill Dillard flew back to America. On the plane, neither spoke about Lead Belly's disease, nor its likely consequence. Dillard never saw Lead Belly again, but all these many years he has greatly valued those days spent together in Paris. For Dillard it was "like being with your grandfather as he told stories of an earlier time." And those stories are, continued Dillard, "a great contribution to give to the world!"

Paris proved a tragic conclusion to Lead Belly's career, the ambitious plans organized by Marjorie and Austen Fairbanks slipped away, and Bill Dillard's career followed another path. On an individual basis, Paris came to represent an unfortunate finale, but for those in the audience, those who were or became fans of Lead Belly, it was a beginning, not an end.

In just fifteen years Lead Belly had taken himself from the confinement of Angola prison to the world stage of Paris. This was an extraordinary journey, and an accomplishment of super proportions. Most people do not achieve this much, nor are able to create this much in their lifetime.

**Sean Killeen**



*Photograph of bearer*

U.S. DEPT. OF JUSTICE
ADMITTED
MAY [illegible]1 1949
NEW YORK
IMMG. & NAT'L SERVICE

4

*This passport, properly visaed, is valid for travel in all countries unless otherwise restricted.*

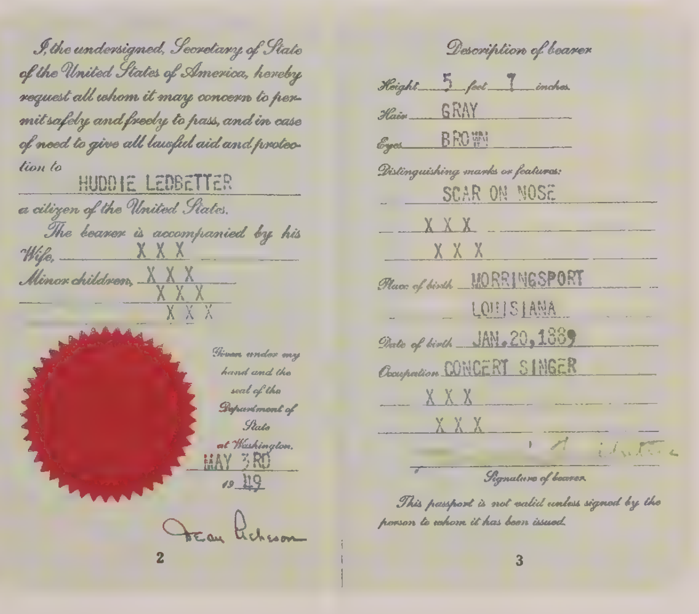
*This passport, unless limited to a shorter period, is valid for two years from its date of issue and may be renewed upon payment of a fee of $5 but the final date of expiration shall not be more than four years from the original date of issue.*

*American citizens traveling in disturbed areas of the world are requested to keep in touch with the nearest American diplomatic or consular officers*

*American citizens making their homes or residing for a prolonged period abroad should register at the nearest American consulate.*

SEE PAGES 6, 7, AND 8 FOR RENEWAL, EXTENSIONS, AMENDMENTS, LIMITATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS.

5



*I, the undersigned, Secretary of State of the United States of America, hereby request all whom it may concern to permit safely and freely to pass, and in case of need to give all lawful aid and protection to*

HUDDIE LEDBETTER

*a citizen of the United States.*

*The bearer is accompanied by his Wife,* X X X

*Minor children,* X X X
X X X
X X X

*Given under my hand and the seal of the Department of State at Washington.* MAY 3RD 19 49

Dean Acheson

2

*Description of bearer*

*Height* 5 *feet* 7 *inches*
*Hair* GRAY
*Eyes* BROWN
*Distinguishing marks or features:*
SCAR ON NOSE
X X X
X X X
*Place of birth* MORRINGSPORT
LOUISIANA
*Date of birth* JAN. 20, 1889
*Occupation* CONCERT SINGER
X X X
X X X

*Signature of bearer*

*This passport is not valid unless signed by the person to whom it has been issued.*

3

# MOSTLY ABOUT PEOPLE

WHEN we met Mr. Huddie Ledbetter, the kindly old king of the twelve-string guitar, he was sitting out in front of the Deux Magots drinking grapefruit juice and hot chocolate and appreciating the tranquil view of St. Germain. "I get scrambled eggs and ham every morning, and hot chocolate," said Mr. Ledbetter, "and then I eat a piece of cake. I like sweets."

He was a gentle old black patriarch, wearing a royal-blue chalk-stripe suit, tan shoes and a Masonic emblem in his buttonhole. When he took off his pearl-gray snapbrim his close-cropped hair was nearly white. He moved gingerly, for his arthritis had been bothering him, and he carried a cane wound with copper wire.

"It's just a copper wire," said Mr. Ledbetter. "I hired a boy and got him to wrap it up for me—not to make it too pretty, you know, just a little different."

Mr. Ledbetter, who is better known as Lead Belly, has done a couple of stretches in the penitentiary, and this has excited the attention of the Sunday supplement set (perhaps because of his novel manner of springing himself by composing musical pleas for pardon addressed to the governor of the state). He also admits outrunning a horse on one occasion when the authorities were looking for him. But all this overlooks his considerable contributions to American music: he has made 227 recordings of his hollers, blues, spirituals and story-songs, all now in the archives of the Library of Congress, and provided almost as great a mass of material for Columbia University's Archives of Primitive Music. He has sung his songs everywhere, from Yale to a basement nightclub in Greenwich Village.

*Lead Bel*

"I ran that horse down. He couldn't catch me. That's the way it was," said Mr. Ledbetter, who has recently had a concert at the Cité Universitaire and a soirée at the Sorbonne. "Paris is a nev world to me. Everybody so quiet and peacefu. No traffic lights...."

Mr Ledbetter continues to write songs as he has all his life, about anything that comes to hand—the Titanic, Roosevelt's elections and his death, Princess Elizabeth, and Trans World Airline. Mr. Ledbetter was so impressed by his crossing on TWA (he paid his own way) that he came up with the following:

Bill and I left New York the fourth of May...
Hay, hay, hay, hay.
Bill and I left New York the fourth of May...
Hay, hay, hay, hay.
The plane we were riding was the TWA...
Hay, hay, hay, hay.
Just listen to what I've got to say...
Hay, hay, hay, hay.
You get free meals on the TWA...
Hay, hay, hay, hay.

* * *

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ENFIN
les vrais Spirituals, chants de travail et blues américains
chantés par
**HUDDIE LEDBETTER**
doyen des chanteurs folkloriques, avec sa GUITARE A 12 CORD
et **BILL DILLARD avec sa trompette**
200 *ans de musique américaine, depuis l'Afrique jusqu'au Jaz*
LUNDI 9 MAI, à 20 h. 45 THEATRE DE LA CITE UNIVERSITAI
21, boulevard Jourdan, Paris (XIVe)
Location : chez Durand, place de la Madeleine, et à la
Fondation des Etats-Unis, 15, boulevard Jourdan.

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**MANCHE DIMANC**

**12.15 Informations.**
**12.18 « Musique de Brasserie » :** Le
cret, intermezzo (Gautier). — La va
valse (Olivier Métra). — Violettes
périales, sélection (Vincent Scotto).

**12.30 « L'AMERIQUE ET SA MU SIQUE ».** Emission de Simon Co pans, délégué de « La Voix de l'Amé rique », présentée avec Austin Fair banks : **Un grand chanteur de fol klore américain : Huddie Leadbetter « Leadbelly ».** L'instrument : La guitare à douze cordes.

**13.01 « LE DISQUE DES AUDITEURS**
**13.05 « Déjeuner en musique »** (d

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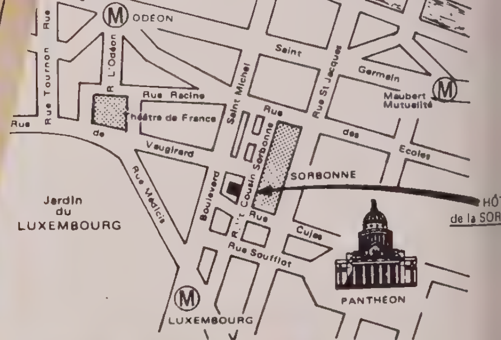
HOTEL de la SORBONNE
6, RUE VICTOR-COUSIN – 75005 PARIS
Tél. : (1) 43 54 58 08 +
Fax : (1) 40 51 05 18 Télex 206 3
MÉTRO : CLUNY - SORBONNE - ST-MICHEL



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# LEAD BELLY STAGES FOLK-SONG COUNTER-ATTRACTION

## Reviewed by Max Jones and Sinclair Traill

THE rival attraction to the Hot Club of Paris Jazz Festival last Sunday was a recital of American folk songs given by the American Negro singer and guitarist, Huddie Ledbetter. He was accompanied by trumpeter Bill Dillard and presented by Hugues Panassié's Hot Club of France.

Huddie, well in his sixties, has long been recognised as one of America's finest singers of Negro folk music. This was his first visit to Europe, and it is to be hoped that he will appear in Britain before he returns home.

### BOP FUGITIVES

The Lead Belly concert took place in the City University Theatre, situated on the outskirts of Paris. The concert was billed to start at 9 o'clock, so that people who wanted to catch Huddie had to miss the bop business at the Salle Pleyel.

I saw quite a few fugitives from the Festival at the Ledbetter show (a contingent from the London Jazz Club was headed by Mr. and Mrs. Bert Wilcox and included Doug Whitton and the ubiquitous Beryl Bryden), including Harry Brown, St. Denis Preston, and colleague Sinclair Traill.

Altogether, there was a very good house for such a really obscure subject as American folklore.

### "CHRONIQUES"

The performance began with Huddie looking and sounding rather small on such a spacious stage. For some reason, the mike was not being used, and it looked as though he would not get his songs across.

But he seemed to gain in strength and personality as the show progressed, and the final curtain fell on sustained applause.

Bill Dillard's excellent trumpet was a great help throughout, in the blues, work songs, spirituals, dance tunes and "chroniques" (ballads about people like Joe Louis and the late President Roosevelt).

All in all, a fine and satisfying show, and the complete antithesis to the rather fervent atmosphere of the Festival at the Salle Pleyel.

Owing to extreme pressure on space, some of our regular features have had to be held over.

They will be back in full strength next week.

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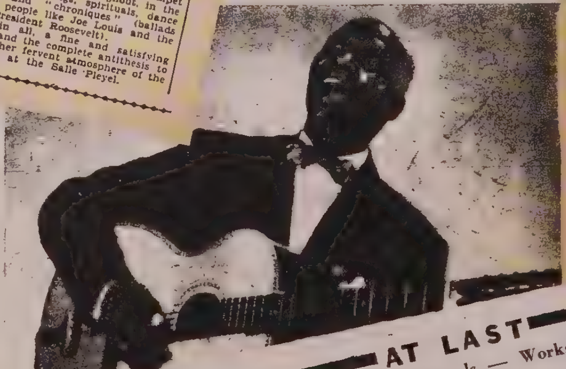
**Le 24 avril, Simon Copans consacrera son émission « l'Amérique et sa musique » à la vie du chanteur noir Leadbelly et surtout à des chansons, complaintes, negro-spirituals, chants de travail, ballades et danses qui reflètent toute la vie des Etats-Unis. Nous pourrons ainsi entendre des enregistrements prêtés par des amis de Leadbelly qui viendra sans doute lui-même à Paris en mai ou juin.** (Photo Abbot.)



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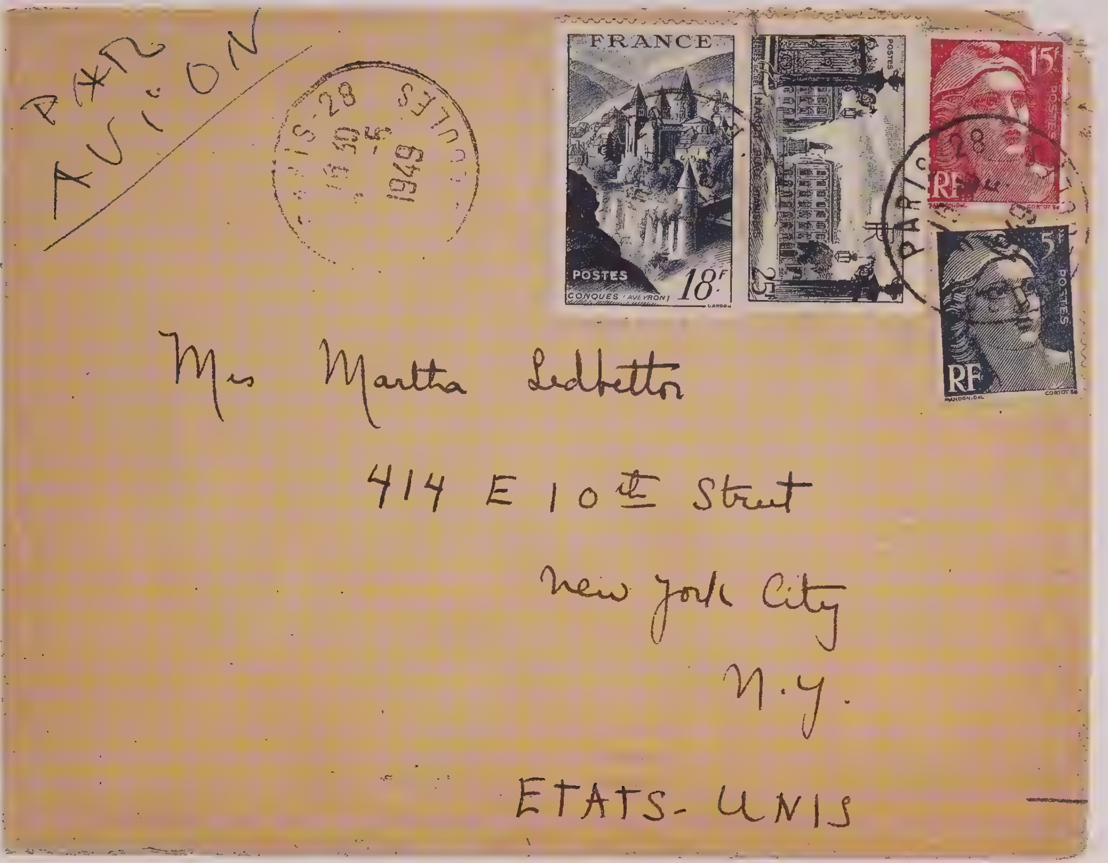
AT LAST
The true American Spirituals — Worksongs — Blues
sung by
**HUDDIE LEDBETTER**
Dean of living folk singers, with his **Twelve-String Guitar**
and
**BILL DILLARD** with his Trumpet
TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF AMERICAN MUSIC - FROM AFRICA TO JAZZ
Monday, May 9, 8:45 p.m. - Théâtre de la Cité Universitaire
21 Boulevard Jourdan, PARIS (14e)
Booking: DURAND, Fondation des Etats-Unis, 15 Bd. Jourdan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1949

Mrs Martha Ledbetter

414 E 10th Street

New York City

N.Y.

ETATS-UNIS

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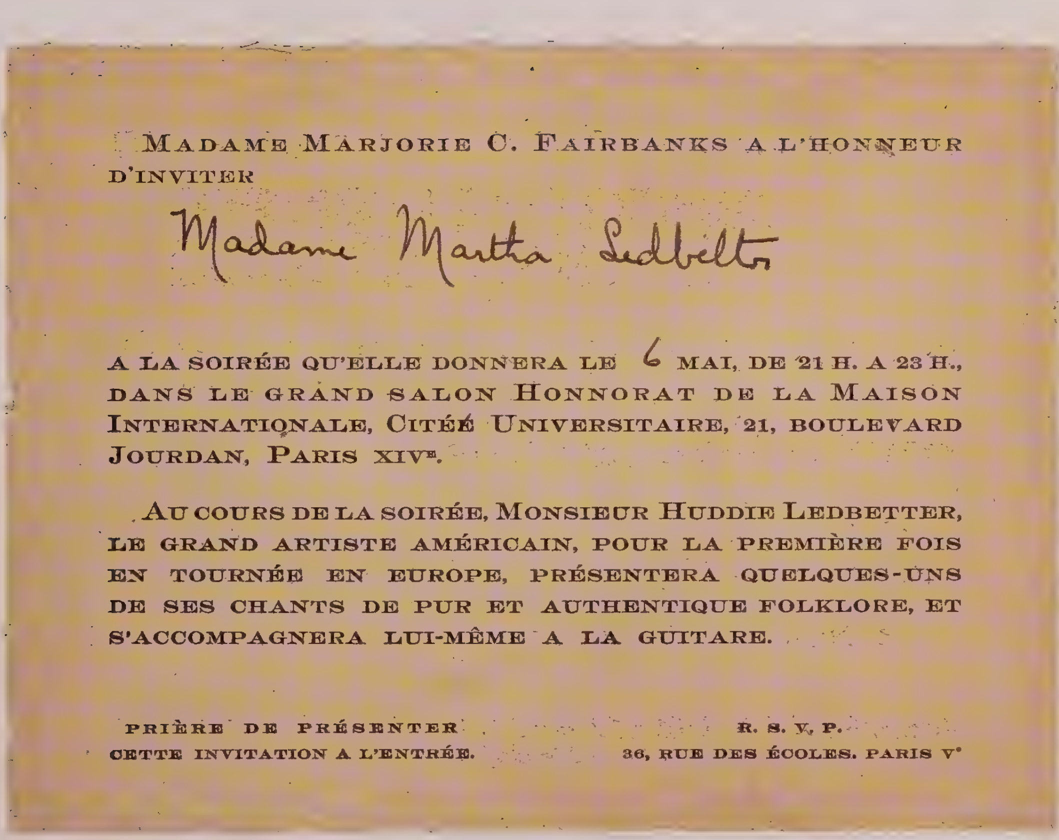


MADAME MARJORIE C. FAIRBANKS A L'HONNEUR D'INVITER

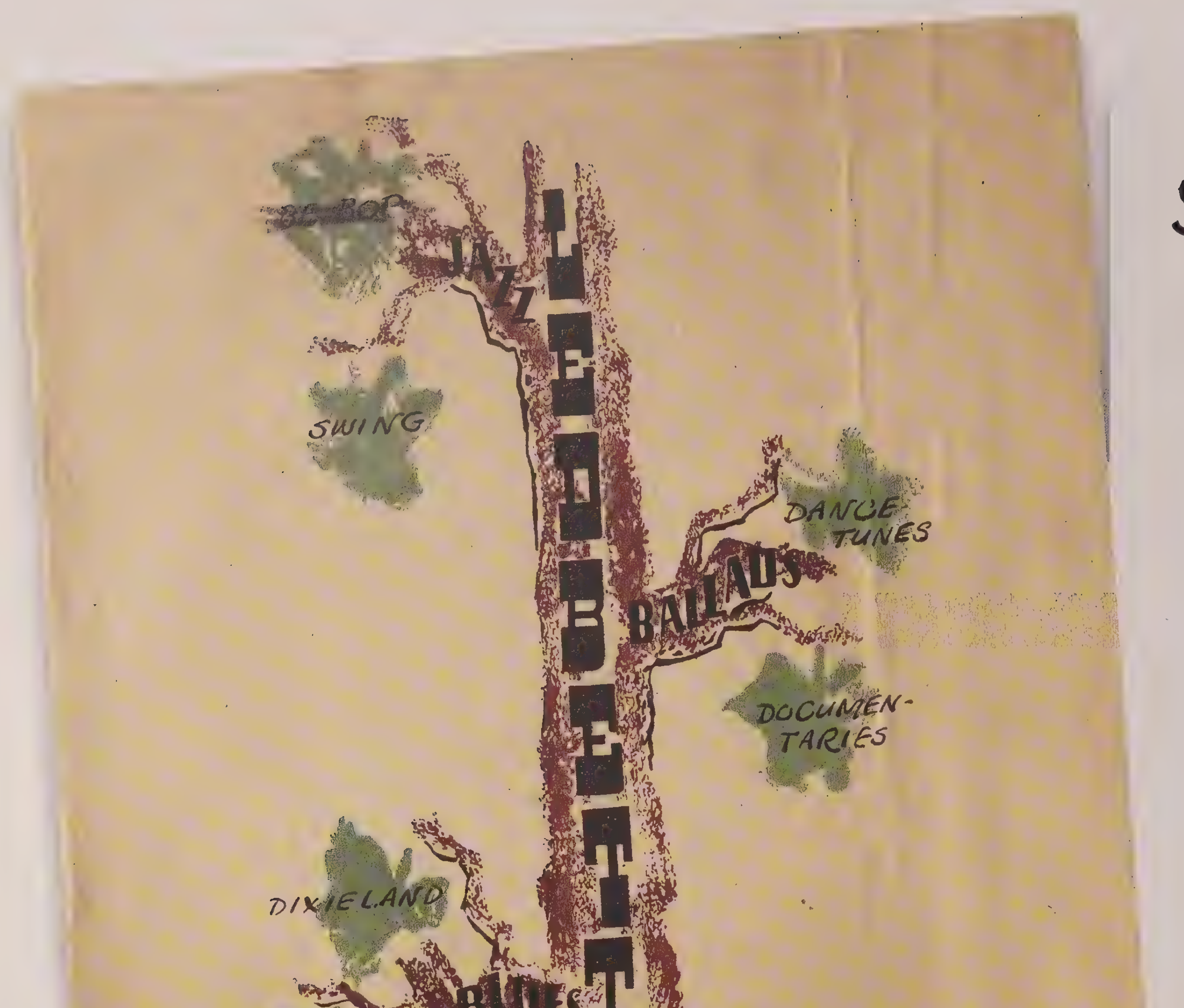
Madame Martha Ledbetter

A LA SOIRÉE QU'ELLE DONNERA LE 6 MAI, DE 21 H. A 23 H., DANS LE GRAND SALON HONNORAT DE LA MAISON INTERNATIONALE, CITÉ UNIVERSITAIRE, 21, BOULEVARD JOURDAN, PARIS XIVe.

AU COURS DE LA SOIRÉE, MONSIEUR HUDDIE LEDBETTER, LE GRAND ARTISTE AMÉRICAIN, POUR LA PREMIÈRE FOIS EN TOURNÉE EN EUROPE, PRÉSENTERA QUELQUES-UNS DE SES CHANTS DE PUR ET AUTHENTIQUE FOLKLORE, ET S'ACCOMPAGNERA LUI-MÊME A LA GUITARE.

PRIÈRE DE PRÉSENTER
CETTE INVITATION A L'ENTRÉE.

R. S. V. P.
36, RUE DES ÉCOLES. PARIS Ve


~~BE-BOP~~
JAZZ
LEDBETTER
SWING
DANCE TUNES
BALLADS
DOCUMENTARIES
DIXIELAND
BLUES
RAGTIME
SPIRITUALS
HOLLERS
WORK-SONGS

# SOIRÉ

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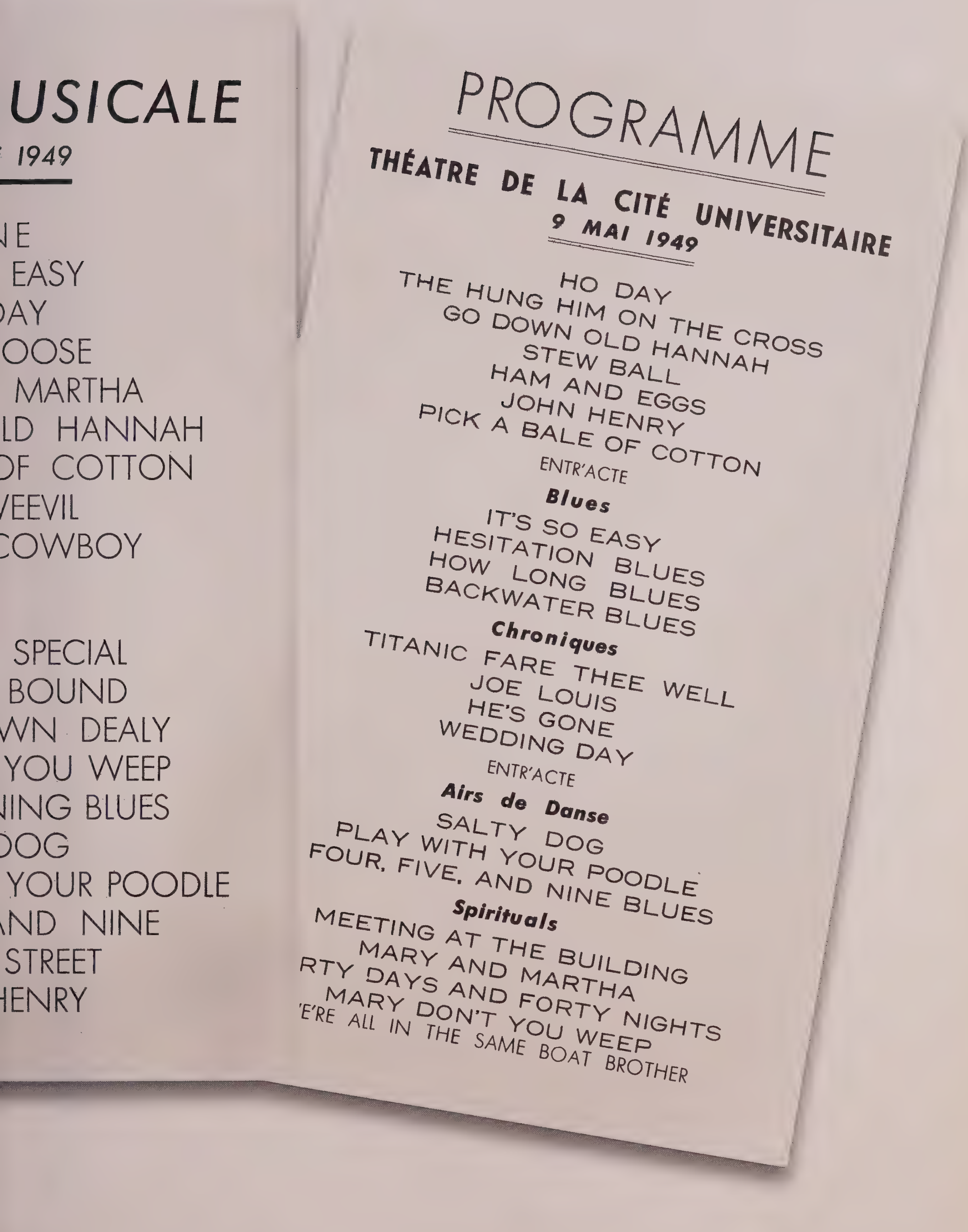

USICALE

1949

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AY
OOSE
MARTHA
LD HANNAH
OF COTTON
EEVIL
COWBOY

SPECIAL
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WN DEALY
YOU WEEP
NING BLUES
OG
YOUR POODLE
ND NINE
STREET
HENRY

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# PROGRAMME

## THÉATRE DE LA CITÉ UNIVERSITAIRE

### 9 MAI 1949

HO DAY
THE HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS
GO DOWN OLD HANNAH
STEW BALL
HAM AND EGGS
JOHN HENRY
PICK A BALE OF COTTON

ENTR'ACTE

**Blues**

IT'S SO EASY
HESITATION BLUES
HOW LONG BLUES
BACKWATER BLUES

**Chroniques**

TITANIC FARE THEE WELL
JOE LOUIS
HE'S GONE
WEDDING DAY

ENTR'ACTE

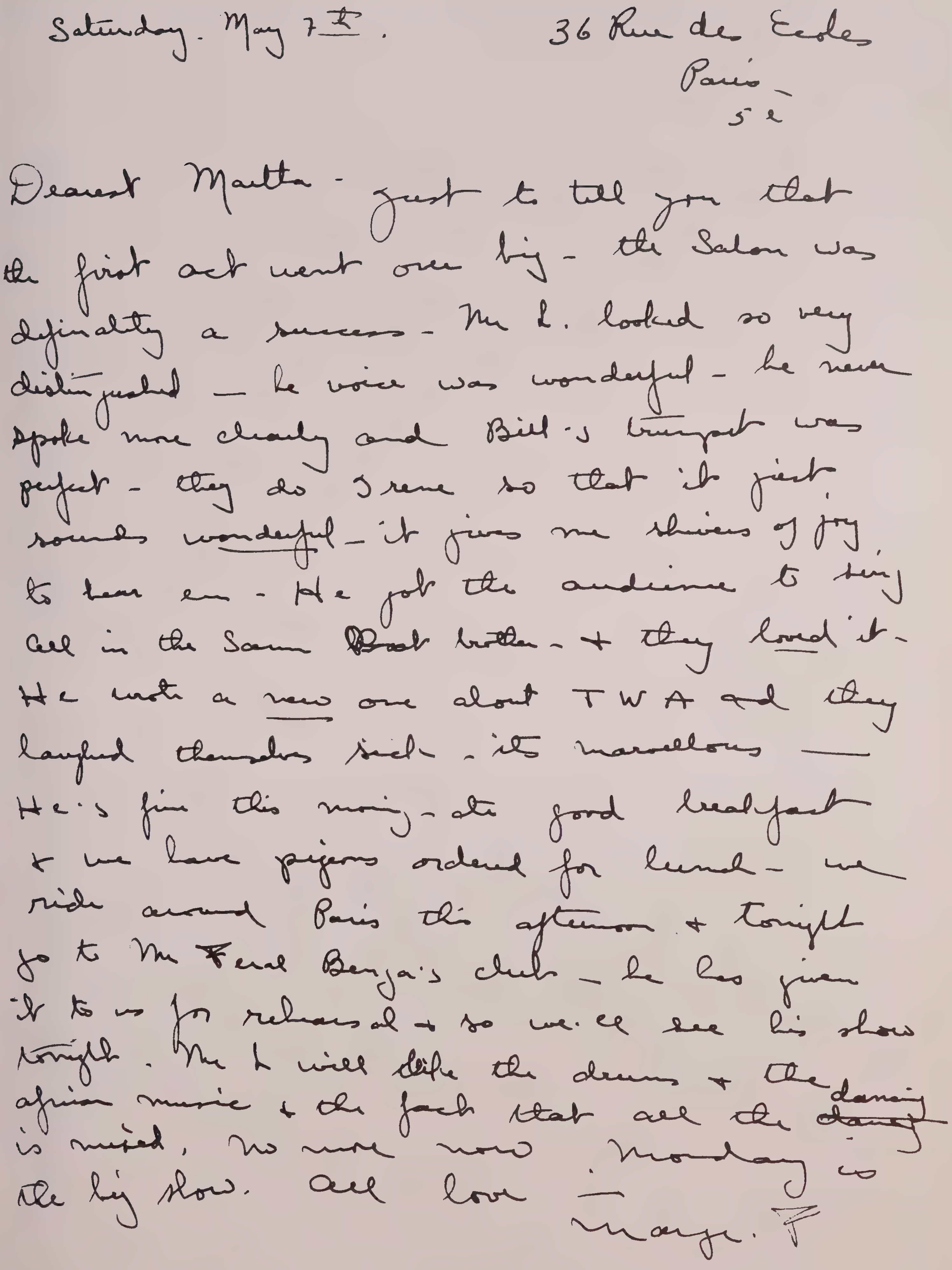
**Airs de Danse**

SALTY DOG
PLAY WITH YOUR POODLE
FOUR, FIVE, AND NINE BLUES

**Spirituals**

MEETING AT THE BUILDING
MARY AND MARTHA
RTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS
MARY DON'T YOU WEEP
E'RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT BROTHER

*Big Chief Russell Moore (trombone) with Lead Belly, Paris Jazz Festival, May 1949, Max Jones Archive*



Saturday. May 7th.

36 Rue des Ecoles
Paris
5e

Dearest Martha - just to tell you that the first act went over big - the Salon was definitely a success - Mr L. looked so very distinguished - his voice was wonderful - he never spoke more clearly and Bill's trumpet was perfect - they do Irene so that it just sounds wonderful - it gives me shivers of joy to hear em - He got the audience to sing All in the Same ~~Boat~~ brother - + they loved it - He wrote a new one about TWA and they laughed themselves sick - its marvellous —— He's fine this morning - ate good breakfast + we have pigeons ordered for lunch - we ride around Paris this afternoon + tonight go to Mr Feral Benga's club - he has given it to us for rehearsal + so we'll see his show tonight. Mr L will like the drums + the african music + the fact that all the ~~dancing~~ dancing is mixed, No more now. Monday is the big show. All love —

Marge.

Mrs. MARJORIE C. FAIRBANKS
International Banking Corporation
52 avenue des Champs-Elysées, Paris

May 13th 1949

Mrs. Martha Ledbetter,
Apartment 26,
414 East, 10th Street
New York NY

Dearest Martha,

Thank you for yours of May 10th. I hope it was a good base-ball game! We are doing fine here. I consider the salon and the concert were both success . We did not make money, but I did not expect to.

We now have a good in at Mr. Feral Benga's club which is nearby. Mr. Benga is the most distinguished colored musical men in Paris. He, his manager and his artists, who are Africans largely, have been more than friendly, and we are to try a gala evening, followed by a repeat, and then probably take a week's engagement. The gala will probably be early next week.

The doctor has given us a very encouraging report on Huddie. Huddie likes him, likes the new medicines, says three times a day "I will not eat anything" and finishes by "eating like a hog". Clifton is doing his usual good job. The big boss is really working, and I am always around. Don't worry, Huddie will not stay over here, but I think while we are here, we will accomplish a great deal. I will write more next week. In the meantime, could you please do up and mail me the ALAN LOMAX book on Mr. Ledbetter, which you have, which belongs to me, and which has marks in it. I need it very badly. Send it the quickest way that you can. I wish you could have seen Huddie's face when I read your letter to him this morning. He has already written you himself.

All love, and keep on writing.

Marge F.

I have told Mr. Harper not to continue on your passport as he is too expensive.

May 27, 1949

This is Austen's report to me
regarding Mr. Ledbetter's condition:

When I spoke with Dr. Conason, in New York, before leaving for France, he told me that Mr. Ledbetter was suffering from what is known as 'Lou Gehring's disease", that is a slowly spreading paralysis resulting from the degeneration of the nerves in the legs and arms. It usually begins, as it did for Mr. L., in one arm or one leg, and slowly spreads until the entire side of the body is paralyzed. It is not a very common disease, and so far as is known, an incurable one. It usually takes from six months to a year and a half to completely paralyze one side of the body, as it did for Lou Gehrig.

In Mr. L's case, the first sign was the weakness in his right foot last winter. It probably began to affect his right arm and hand about January of this year. It has now progressed to the point where the biceps (that is the muscle which bends the arm) is three-quarters paralysed, and the fingers of the right hand are greatly weakened.

Dr. Conason has been treating Mr. L. with various drugs which increase the circulation of blood by making the blood vessels expand. Before Mr. L. left he was giving these drugs by injection directly into the leg and the arm. When Mr. L. left for France, he changed over to pills of the same sort. It is this treatment which has caused the swelling of the right leg and foot as a result of the successful stimulation of the circulation in the leg.

During the period that Dr. Conason was treating him, there was apparently a slight improvement. While this is unheard of in the case of this disease, it is probably explained by Mr. L's magnificent vitality compensating for the paralysis by increased efforts to move the muscles. This would explain his tiredness after walking only a short distance, and his inability to play the guitar, using his index finger to pluck the strings, for more than five minutes at a time.

After arriving in France, Mr. L. found that the pills were somewhat too strong, making him rather dizzy for several minutes after taking them. He also felt that he was not improving as rapidly as he had hoped. Mother and I therefore arranged for him to see Dr. John M. Dax here.

After I had explained to Dr. Dax that Dr. Conason felt strongly that Mr. L. should not be told the incurable nature of his disease, and Dr. Dax had agreed that it was probably wise to keep up his confidence so far as possible, he examined Mr. L. and found his general physical condition to be excellent, and the progress of the disease as I have outlined above. He changed to prescription of the vasodilator to a milder one which could be increased slowly in strength by increasing the number of pills taken in a day. During the past week we have been slowly increasing the number of pills, so far without reaching the point of objectionable ill effects Mr.L. noticed with the earlier prescription.

# LEAD BELLY AS FRIEND

*"He was a great man and we all respected, loved and admired him!"*
**Oscar Brand**

Famous folk singer at Hollywood and Vine. No, it wasn't like that. There was a war on: the time was either late 1944 or early 1945 — and Lead Belly's small fame centered around New York City and in occasional sensationalized newsmagazine coverage. But he was singing on Hollywood Boulevard, and not far from Vine Street in what was, as I remember it, a movie theatre, not a large one. It was probably at night, certainly it was on a weekend because I was there — and I was and enlisted soldier on duty at an army camp some fifty miles away. I could have been in attendance only by way of a weekend pass. How had I heard about the program? My guess now is that I had seen a small notice about it in *The People's World,* a communist newspaper. Why did this catch my attention? Because I was one of the few who'd bought and read books (hardly bestsellers) by John A. and Alan Lomax, including *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly.* Also, I'd bought and listened to some ten-inch 78 Musicraft recordings by Lead Belly.

So I was there out of sympathetic curiosity. I quickly became an enthusiast. From Lead Belly at his best, electric sparks seemed to fly. At about that same time, and in Los Angeles, I experienced a like-galvanizing experience listening to a totally dissimilar musical performer: Vladimir Horowitz. Afterward, with good-byes to the friends who were with me at Lead Belly's solo performance, I returned to camp, leaving them with this firm injunction, "Try to get in touch with Lead Belly!"

They succeeded. And it was the great good fortune of a small group of us to spend numerous weekend evenings with that wonderful performer, that wonderful friend. From my first sight of Lead, as we called him, I had seen an old man for two reasons: his hair was white and I was in my twenties. But among young men and women who loved his music he grew perceptibly younger. Never did we see anything of the hulking figure as often described, or of the foreboding man with an ugly neck scar (never glimpsed by me). He was a vigorous man seemingly in his prime (he does in photographs of that time appearing in the Winter/Spring 1995 issue of the *Lead Belly Letter).* Always carefully dressed, he was of about average height and of decidedly more than average geniality. A person of great charm and genuine warmth. A friend of that bygone time spoke to me only the other day of Lead Belly's truly handsome head and his usual benign expression.

I've since often wondered at Lead's having the time and inclination to join us few friends as often as he did. I was myself no musician, but some of the others were, some with a professional understanding of his worth. I think he felt with all of us the relaxation of simple friendship. Mardy, the sister of my friend Ruth Moore, was married to Eddy Bartell, the possessor of a fine voice himself, a voice that was heard on Broadway for five years in *Hellzapoppin.* We usually met in the comfortable home of the Bartells in Laurel Canyon. Perhaps a few beers were drunk, but for hours on end it was just Lead Belly in informal recital, all to his liking — nothing like the unpleasant pressure I later heard him describe of recording for Moe Asch, who, he said, paced around with watch in hand motioning him to hurry. No doubt, if he'd not been making music with us he would have been practicing alone, honing his art. But that art thrived on the give and take with an audience however small. Lead, with his twelve-string guitar, was ever the performer, the seemingly inexhaustible performer.

He would roam through his huge repertory, all the way from *Irene* — "I guessed you in my dreams" — to extended evocations of a black preacher's service down south. None of us knew anything about recording devices, nor did we ever think of taking any photographs. In our enjoyment of the man and his music, we also failed to put questions to him such as Lead Belly fans of today would wisely put. And, although the tenor of our politics was generally leftist, political conversation there was none — certainly none from Lead's mouth. One subject of conversation I especially regret not having with him: Richard Wright. It was not till decades later that I read of his knowing Wright, in the late '30s in New York, whom I'd had the pleasure of knowing during the summer of 1940 in North Carolina when he was working with Paul Green on the dramatic adaptation of his *Native Son*.

Only one well-known musical figure did I hear Lead refer to. The subject probably came up because I'd recently fallen under the sultry spell of Billie Holiday in a San Francisco club. As I delivered Lead to his door one night, he turned to me and said with the utmost seriousness: "That woman is all eeeevil!"

We group of friends often shook our heads in amazement at Hollywood's lack of interest in Lead Belly. We knew, without hearing much from him about it, that he sought as best he could to enter the big-time entertainment world. But those golden, or brass, doors didn't open for him. Today we know too well how those doors can open for gifted performers, only to emit them, in the manner of Michael Jackson, in a shower of hype, sleaze, and megabucks. Were there people in 'The Industry' in Hollywood who might at least have presented Lead Belly honestly? Unfortunately, no one rose to the occasion in the way that Eudora Welty in her story "Powerhouse" evoked with genius the visit in those years of Fats Waller to Jackson, Mississippi.

The only Hollywood gatherings featuring Lead Belly that I experienced were leftist, Communist. Once Ruth Moore and I attended a large banquet with orchestra in a prominent building on Central Avenue. I remember Groucho Marx as one of numerous stellar figures present. And Lead Belly also sang at Larry Edmund's small Book Shop on Cahuenga Street in Hollywood, where we two had to sit on the floor because of the crush of people attending. Recently I've read strong condemnation of what is described as Communist exploitation of Lead Belly. It's entirely conceivable that some leftists — as well as rightists and centrists — may have sometimes used and misused the singer. But the main fact is that Lead Belly gladly went to the few places where he was wanted, and in leftist circles he was both wanted and valued. In *The Nation of* August 14/21, 1995, music critic Gene Santoro writes of how Lead Belly became "the radical chic darling of New York leftists."

So, even as I deplore the stupendous failure to appreciate the living Lead Belly, I am aware of the charges and sarcasm now being leveled at his 'premature' friends and admirers.

I remember only one occasion when I saw the more rambunctious Lead Belly. That was at a rather large springtime party of young people in San Francisco (I was on an extended pass that time). There, to my surprise, was Lead, a bit intoxicated, a lady's man verging on boisterous behavior. Lead was seeking his pleasure; I, mine. I, who was there all night, was aware of Lead's fairly early departure to the expressed relief of several of the men who'd resented his imposing antics. Not that of the Lead Belly known to my Hollywood friends. At one of the last visits Lead paid to the Bartells in late '44, he found them dismayed by the disappearance the day before of their young son Tony's German Shepherd named Ricky. Behold, soon after Lead's arrival, Ricky came bounding back onto the family patio. And behold, Lead on the spot enchanted the Bartells by performing a song for the occasion, *Ricky Done Come Home!*

As a poet I was especially interested in the text — I should say words — of Lead's blues, ballads, field hollers, and pop ditties. I still have a page that I typed from my careful longhand transcription of his singing *Duncan and Brady*. In my ignorance I probably thought I was setting down the definitive version — a conception wholly alien to such a singer. But I relish this ballad. Is it possible that it's had but one recording by Lead Belly on a 1947 Folkways LP?

He had recorded for Capitol discs in 1944 in a session with zither-player Paul Mason Howard, and he seemed pleased with the result. Some of us told him we were less pleased. It's always seemed to me that none of Lead's recordings with other performers (instrumentalists and vocalists) are as effective as his solo releases. The recording that most evokes for me the Lead I knew is *YellowGal* on a ten-inch Musicraft (310-A) record, a performance that may shortly be available on a sonically superior CD. But here is Lead in pristine form with almost no words besides the title, continuously repeated as refrain, fashioning both subtle and dynamic variety throughout: a superb *tour de force*.

I don't remember that it was my idea. I think that somebody in authority at my Army camp, learning that I knew Lead Belly, arranged for me, serving in the Information — Education office there, to bring him to the post to entertain the enlisted men. In any event — and oddly, as it seemed to me — Corporal Nickson was sent forth with a driver in a staff car to escort Lead. Our first stop in Hollywood on a fine spring evening was to pick up Ruth Moore; then when we called for the willing, enthusiastic guest performer we were asked of he might also pick up a friend. This we did. She was a young, good-looking, blonde woman fresh out of Smith College in Massachusetts as I recall, who carried with her an assortment of cameras. She had that night marvelous photo opportunities. But did she take any pictures? I don't remember.

The Service Center at camp Anza, the port of Los

Angeles' staging area near Riverside, proved to be just about right for Lead: fairly large but not so much so as to preclude some intimacy. He soon had the uniformed audience of about 150 captivated; he himself seemed to relish every minute of it. His *I Don't Want No More of Army Life* (with improvised words involving me, whom he always called Nick) roused especial glee. Were there any women soldiers present? Men exclusively, I think — mostly men with white skin. I wish I could remember whether there were any black soldiers present. The chances are: none. Recently, I read the complaint registered by a number of black World War II vets that many prisoners of war were treated better by the army than they were. At some entertainments, POWs were often seated, while black American soldiers had to stand in the rear.

The ovation for our guest ended, the four of us proceeded to the canteen for some refreshment — again a room of fair size, again white GIs. A few young black men were there, presumably soldiers, who were serving the drinks — beer, I believe. Suddenly, in the midst of conviviality at our table, a young white soldier reasonably good-looking but flushed with drink stood alongside us, then leaned toward the blonde women to ask in a broad southern accent: "Are you ladies pleased to be in such company?" There was a stunned silence followed by the women's assurance that they were. Another awkward moment or two more, and the questioner moved uncertainly away.

At the door as we were leaving, I was standing next to Lead when one of the black soldiers spoke solemnly, softly to him: "We were watching that, and we were ready." Lead, smiling knowingly, reassured the young man. Anza may have been Lead's sole gig at an army post.

And so too the war ended. By early 1946, after four years of army service, I left California to spend several months in my hometown of Roswell, New Mexico, before returning to university study in North Carolina. Before the close of that year Lead was back in Manhattan, back, for the time being, with his wife Martha. I had given his address and telephone number to a friend, Junius Scales, who would pass back to me word of Huddie Ledbetter. But knowing little about Ledbetter, he was surprised to hear him speak of his life in prison. "What were you in prison for?" " Murder." "You killed somebody?" "Junie, that man neeeeded killin'."

My wife and I, right after our marriage in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in the summer of 1947, paid a visit to Manhattan. I called Lead, who asked us to come to his place for a little celebration. On the night of September 15 the two of us, with friend Junius and a six-pack of beer, climbed the six flights of stairs to Lead's apartment at 414 East 10th Street. Lead's welcoming was so generous as to make my greeting of him — I say to my embarrassment — seem flat. Because I'd spoken with him on the telephone, I suppose I was taking his presence for granted. Lead had a friend's and a gentleman's more natural recognition that we'd not seen each other for nearly two years.

He was a gallant host, and his home was soon rocking with music, his music. Now and again neighbors in the building would join us. Lead even brought forth his squeeze box to play. Ever the sly teaser, he pretended to take account of Junius's accompanying the newlyweds by adapting one of his songs to run, "Junie's diggin' Nick's potatoes." It was 2:30 before we left the party. Lead had been expecting his lady friend — his "Irene," as he called her — to come. And "Irene" indeed did come in time for brief introductions as we were leaving.

A few years ago the sisters Ruth and Mardy sent me a copy of the letter Lead had written to Mardy two days after our visit to tell "your peoples, the Best in the World! About it". He added such news as, "i don't have no wife she ran away new years night I saw her one time since so i am by my self and haven a good time." He mentioned his new album "Midnight Special" and reported, "i just sign a contrack for 2 years so i'am not worrid...."

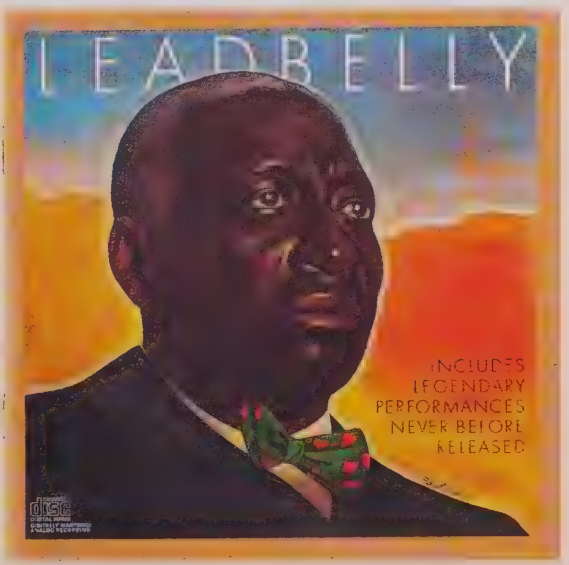
That was my farewell to Lead Belly.

Yet our paths very nearly did cross again. For the better part of two years my wife and I had been in France, I as a student under the GI Bill of Rights. In the spring of 1949 we were briefly in Zurich, where we took Mrs. Nora Joyce, the widow of the writer James Joyce, to a restaurant for lunch. Since we were headed for Paris, she kindly gave us the address of her friend Mrs. Maria Jolas. In her handsome Parisian apartment Mrs. Jolas graciously sang for us, accompanying herself at the piano, "Words and Air by James Joyce." The singing led me to mention Lead Belly. "Do you know," she said, "he was sitting in this chair you are in only two days ago." She had been charmed by Lead; she believed he was already flying back to New York; I don't recall her saying anything about his sickness.

Before the year was out I read in a newspaper that Lead had died. His wife Martha took him back home to Louisiana for burial. But for the past half century his music has resisted burial.

How joyfully Huddie Ledbetter would bask in his growing fame with the ever widening transmission of his voice and guitar through the media of this country and throughout the world. And for those of us who had the privilege of knowing him, Lead Belly the man vibrates in our memories, adding an extra dimension to the transcriptions of his vivid songs, his pulsing rhythms.

**Richard Nickson**


LEADBELLY
INCLUDES LEGENDARY PERFORMANCES NEVER BEFORE RELEASED

*album cover art by Paul Davis*

### Lead Belly Carries On

Seven years ago it was ordained that I was to be host to an old offender. My old friend, John Avery Lomax, wrote to me that he was bringing with him to New York as his chauffeur an ex-con from the Southwest. Lomax's interest in having the Louisiana governor pardon his man was, however, based on the latter's ability as a creator of folk music.

"Get some of your crowd together some night in Brooklyn and Lead Belly will sing for you as long as you like" was the substance of Lomax's letter to me.

I sent a letter about it to the New Masses. Some Negro answered that Lomax was about to exploit his protege. I resented that. But more I resented Lomax's own attitude toward Lead Belly. He was right. I was wrong, perhaps. But I did not think that Lead Belly "had to be kept in his place" because he was black.

Nor was that Lomax's idea. His was the grave responsibility of having recommended the pardon of a dangerous criminal. A few years later he went to prison in New York for an attack on another Negro in Harlem. And he wasn't exactly to be trusted not to take a shot at a guy with a few drinks to the good.

However, after eleven years in jail and two score and one out, Lead Belly today is different — dependable, still as entertaining as ever, a successful entertainer in night clubs and at private parties.

I did not meet Lead Belly when he came here with Lomax seven years ago. The protector soured on me when I suggested that the ex-con singer would sit at my table as one of a score of guests and not be relegated to wait his turn at entertainment in my furnace room. And so my personal contact with Lomax ceased after a spell of knowing him for thirty years. And my personal acquaintance with Lead Belly never began.

Not until Lead Belly came to sing at the Village Vanguard on Seventh Avenue South, just below West 11th and Bank Streets. I met him there just before Christmas and had a quarter-hour talkfest with him before the program began.

More of that later. But you may feel the charm of Lead Belly when I tell you how he disposed of the six years we have lost as knowing friends. I told him we had planned a big dinner party for him but that we did not agree with Lomax the elder about the way our guest of honor was to be treated, I told him that I haven't seen Lomax for seven years.

He fixed that. When he came back for his first encore he announced, after first having asked my permission to do so, "I'm now going to sing a song in honor of a man who is sitting right here tonight. The first night I game to New York with Mr. Lomax in 1935 this man who is here tonight gave a big dinner for us for a room full of people. So I sang this song then and I sing it now. It is about what drivers say to their oxen."

That was a pretty speech. Lead Belly is the most tactful liar I know. He can lie a lie over six years long sincerely enough to make a hundred people believe it. I had told him Alan Lomax had sung a song with a lot of God Damns in it. And so the premier collector of folk music made it ring through over six years of memory with a tang and a twang and a tactful tale only a genius could sponsor.

The charm of Lead Belly is not only this God-given gift of song and guitar. If you see him today you see a dark-skinned Negro of fifty-two with streaks of grey in his kinky hair. You see a well-groomed man with a hundred and sixty pounds of well-being. You see a face that is at once a record of the tragedies of the past, the excitement of the present and confidence in the future. But best of all you look into eyes that sparkle and snap and know what it's all about.

Lead Belly has a better half and knows it. Names don't matter much but I seem to remember hers is Martha. Anyway, she is Martha-minded and looks after her Huddie, her hubby, as carefully as an executor looks after an estate. Lead Belly told me some things about her. She is a youngish woman, fifteen or twenty years his junior. But best of all she manages him, cares for his clothes, cares for his food, cares for his savings. Cares enough for any woman who is wed to a jailbird songbird.

When Lead Belly was eighteen I was twenty-one. That was before he killed a man and went to the penitentiary in Texas. And that was when we knew the same people, opened the same doors and spent our money in the same stores. For I spent from April till November in 1908 in and around Karnack, in East Texas, about midway between Shreveport and Jefferson and not far from Marshall. I was doing an editorial job on a book of poems for Alonso Perkins Hope.

At this same time, at the age of eighteen, Huddie was already minstrelling around this section, doing odd jobs and meeting the same people I met: Taylor who bought fish from Caddo Lake fishermen and sold it to Shreveport commission merchants; Bob Hope, brother of my poet host; Homer Key's father, a banker in Marshall; a German woodsman and family on Caddo Lake; and scores of others, black and white, whose names I have mostly forgotten. I can not even recall the name of A. P. Hope's Negro mistress, a charming mulatto cook I shall always remember for her three-times-a-day fried chicken and hot biscuits.

I returned to my broken home in Austin and left Texas for all time to do four more years of work in two state universities in the Midwest, Nebraska and Iowa. Eventually he got into trouble in Louisiana and spent four more years in the pen there. Another governor pardoned him and now he is a New Yorker and so am I.

I need not sing Huddie Ledbetter's praises for the songs he writes and the music he creates on his ge-tar (with a hard g and the accent on the first syllable). But I have rarely met a Texan who thrilled me as much as he did when I discovered we had scores of friends in common. And I have a tense hope that I shall meet Mr. And Mrs. Ledbetter again and again, that we shall have more scores of friends in common that are proper.

**Lew Nye**

## Best of Friends

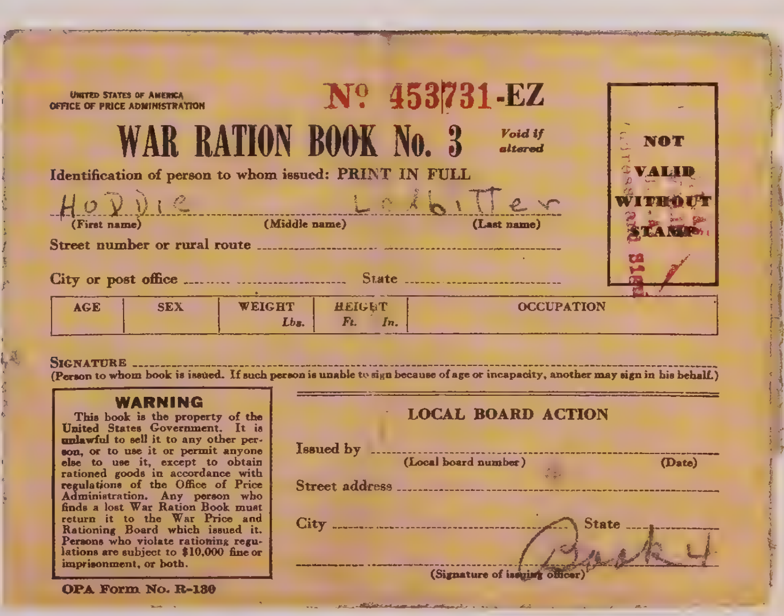
Me and Huddie Ledbetter,
Yes we was the best of friends,
Well, me and Huddie Ledbetter,
We was the best of friends.
Well, he could pick more cotton,
Yes I mean than four or five men.

Me and Huddie Ledbetter
Never had no fallin' out,
Well, me and Huddie Ledbetter
Oh, never had no fallin' out.
Well, we were wild to the women,
Yes, and we knowed what it's all about.

The poor boy wrote a million songs,
Yes he wrote day and night.
The poor boy wrote a million songs,
Yes, you know he wrote day and night.
Well, the song I loved to hear him sing,
Irene Goodnight.

He was known from coast to coast,
Yes he was known way 'cross the sea,
Well he was known from coast to coast,
Yes he was known way 'cross the sea.
Well all the women and men over there,
Huddie Ledbetter, won't you play and sing for me!

**Sonny Terry**



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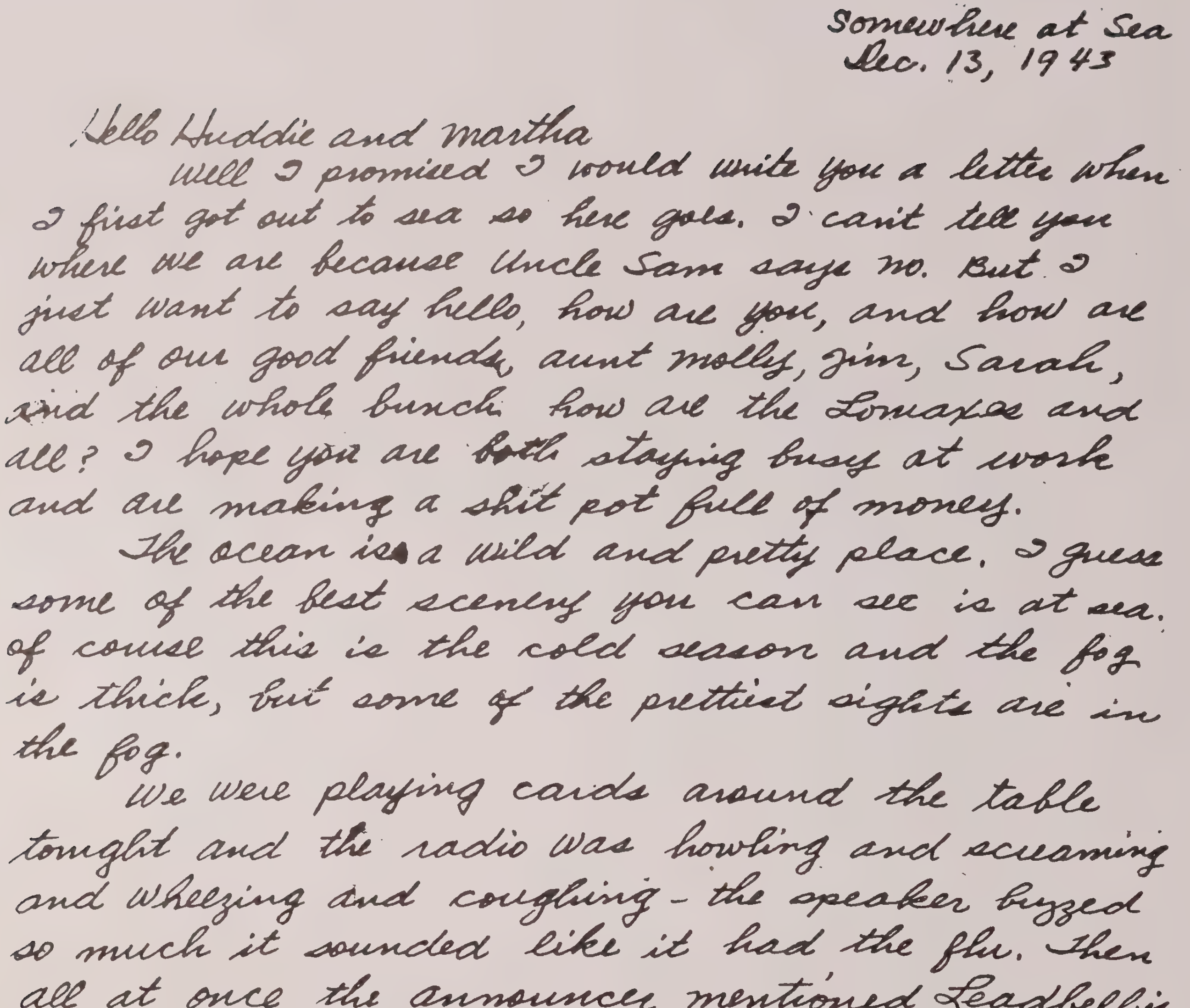


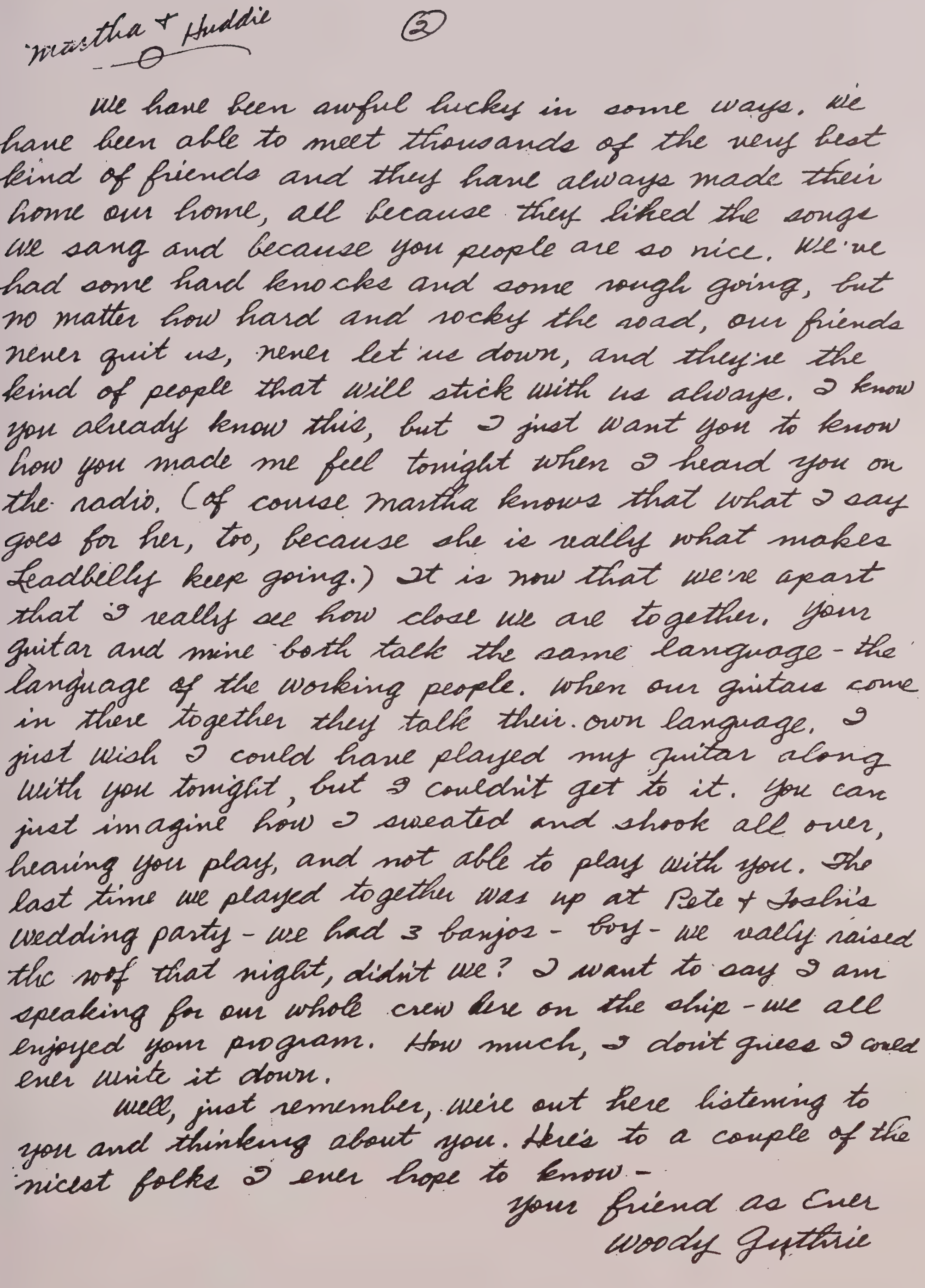
Somewhere at Sea
Dec. 13, 1943

Hello Huddie and Martha

Well I promised I would write you a letter when I first got out to sea so here goes. I can't tell you where we are because Uncle Sam says no. But I just want to say hello, how are you, and how are all of our good friends, aunt Molly, Jim, Sarah, and the whole bunch. how are the Lomaxes and all? I hope you are ~~both~~ staying busy at work and are making a shit pot full of money.

The ocean is a wild and pretty place. I guess some of the best scenery you can see is at sea. of course this is the cold season and the fog is thick, but some of the prettiest sights are in the fog.

We were playing cards around the table tonight and the radio was howling and screaming and wheezing and coughing - the speaker buzzed so much it sounded like it had the flu. Then all at once the announcer mentioned Leadbelly's name and I heard the big twelve string playing and "Irene goodnight" soft in the background. It made me feel so funny I plumb forgot my game of cards. I almost forgot the messroom, the ship, and the whole deal, as I sat there with a big grin across my face listening. I patted on the table and drifted away in the clouds. I guess I was dreaming of all the good old times we've had together, even back to when I first met you folks, back when you roomed and boarded me when I first came to New York. We really had some good times together. and we knew more good honest people than the world can hold.



Martha & Huddie

②

We have been awful lucky in some ways. We have been able to meet thousands of the very best kind of friends and they have always made their home our home, all because they liked the songs we sang and because you people are so nice. We've had some hard knocks and some rough going, but no matter how hard and rocky the road, our friends never quit us, never let us down, and they're the kind of people that will stick with us always. I know you already know this, but I just want you to know how you made me feel tonight when I heard you on the radio. (Of course Martha knows that what I say goes for her, too, because she is really what makes Leadbelly keep going.) It is now that we're apart that I really see how close we are together. Your guitar and mine both talk the same language - the language of the working people. When our guitars come in there together they talk their own language. I just wish I could have played my guitar along with you tonight, but I couldn't get to it. You can just imagine how I sweated and shook all over, hearing you play, and not able to play with you. The last time we played together was up at Pete & Toshi's wedding party - we had 3 banjos - boy - we really raised the roof that night, didn't we? I want to say I am speaking for our whole crew here on the ship - we all enjoyed your program. How much, I don't guess I could ever write it down.

Well, just remember, we're out here listening to you and thinking about you. Here's to a couple of the nicest folks I ever hope to know -

Your friend as Ever
Woody Guthrie

# STELLA

*"You gotta get the tone first, then the words; then I play the song on my guitar."*

**Mistress Stella speaks**

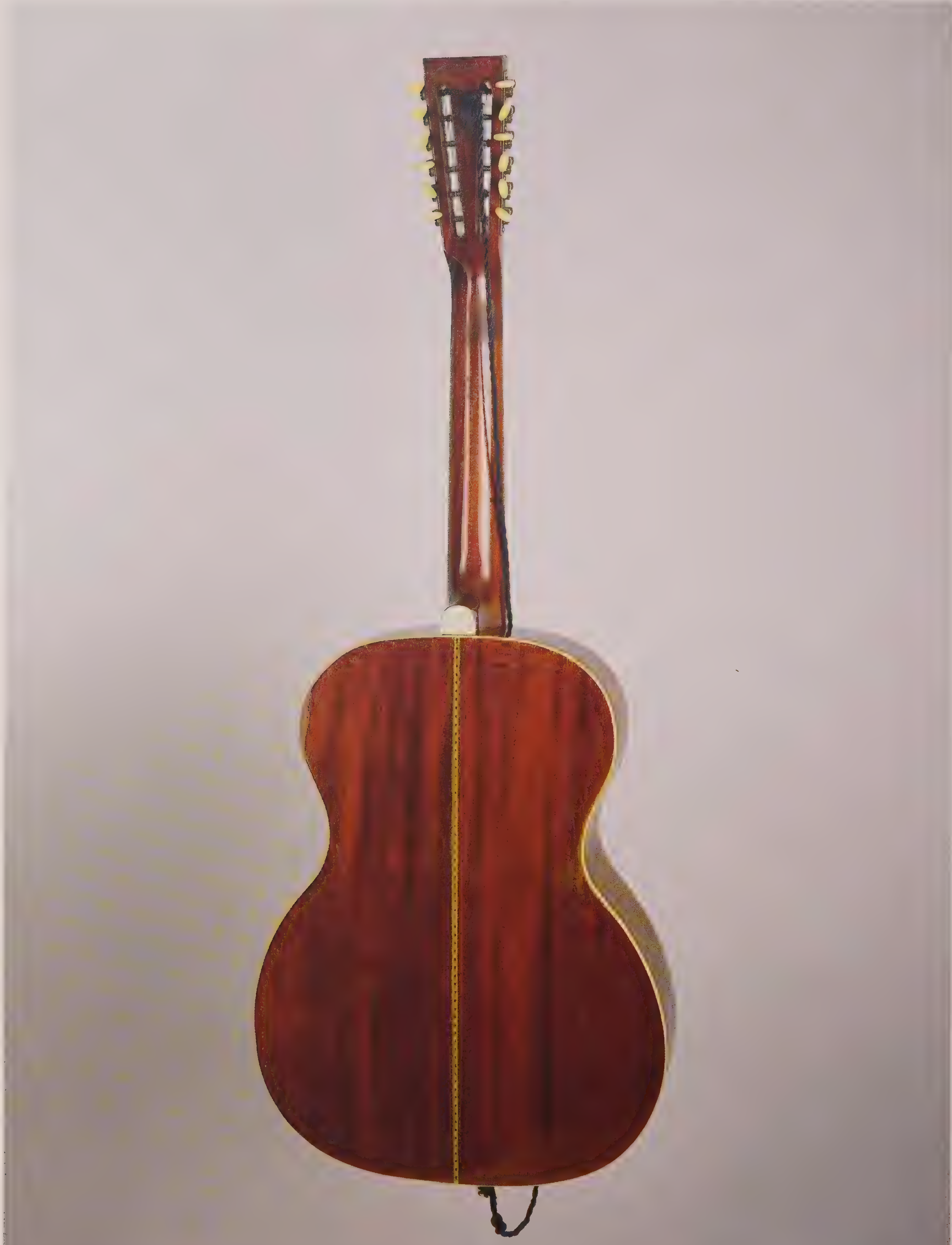
you think i'm his property
'cause he paid cash
to grab me by the neck,
swing me 'cross his knee
and stroke the living song from my hips.

you think he is master of all
my twelve tongues, spreading notes
thick as a starless night, strangling spine
till my voice is a jungle of chords.

the truth is that i owned him
since the word *love* first blessed his lips
since *hurt* and *flight* and *free*
carved their way into the cotton
fused bones of his fretting hand,
since he learned how pleading men hunt
for my face in the well of their throats
till their tongues are soaked with want.

yes, each day he comes back
home from the fields,
from chain gang fury,
from the smell of sometime women
who borrow his body. he bends
his weight around me
like a wilting weed,
drinking in my kiss
of fretboard across fingertip
'til he can stand up straight again,
aching from what he left behind,
rising sure as dawn.

**Tyehimba Jess**



## Lead Belly and His Twelve-String Stella

Lead Belly best expressed himself when he had his twelve-string guitar across his chest. He was comfortable and more at ease when holding it. He was a talkative man who became even more gregarious with his Stella in hand. He derived a soothing quality from his nimble strumming of the heavy gauge strings. The effect was a relaxing mood Lead Belly created. He attained a symbiotic syndrome. The guitar inspired him, and together they, both in unison, arrested the interest and attention of the listener. Hearing the expression of Lead Belly, listeners became fans who fueled Lead Belly to play on and on.

Lead Belly liked to play, and most particularly to play for people. He immensely enjoyed the positive reaction he obtained from his listeners. Lead Belly learned to play guitar as a young boy. In his twenties in Dallas, he heard the sound of a twelve-string guitar and from that point on, made it his own. He had his twelve-string Stella with him during those long years in Texas' Sugarland prison. He had it with him in Angola, and naturally took it with him when he traveled north in 1934. His "old green box" was bandaged together and nearly worn out.

**George Gruhn**

*The following views on the twelve-string are helpful in understanding Lead Belly's attachment to his twelve-string Stella:*

**George Gruhn:**

The twelve-string guitar arrived in the New World via Hispanic influences. As early as 1913 Lyons & Healy in Chicago and Oscar Schmidt in Jersey City were manufacturing twelve-string guitars. There has long been a Stella label, and it's quite probable that, even in the early part of the century, Stella guitars were being made by ghost manufacturers, as well as by Oscar Schmidt.

Lead Belly had tremendous drive; his charisma just oozed through his recordings. Lead Belly was not a fancy player but what he did, he did superbly well for he made every note count. He wasn't really a flashy player; he was an accompanist rather than strictly an instrumentalist.

Lead Belly was a physically large, very powerful man. He played his twelve-string very, very hard. He didn't just tickle those strings. He played a big guitar, and played it hard. The twelve-string was one of the few guitars that responded to his touch. His twelve-string Stella was physically hard to play. Lead Belly tuned below standard concert pitch with very heavy strings, and with pretty high action.

Had Lead Belly not played a twelve-string guitar, Pete Seeger probably would not have either. Had Pete Seeger not played and promoted the twelve-string, as well as promoting Lead Belly and his music, Lead Belly might not be so well known.

Lead Belly was influential enough that had he not built that extremely solid foundation, all these other guys who may be more technically proficient would not be around playing twelve-string today.

**Jon Lundberg:**

More than ten years ago as reported in *Frets* magazine, eight guitars were built by Jon Lundberg and Mario Martello, patterned after the Stella Lead Belly played. They were challenged by Stella's tonal success, more tonal than other twelve-strings.

"They were exactly like the original Stellas except for three differences which, through the years, we found we had to apply to the building of those old Stellas." Originally, those guitars had rosewood bridges with fretboards of birch or maple that had been "ebonized" — which meant the wood was painted or stained black, causing it to eventually rot. Lundberg and Martello used a rosewood bridge, and to make it look like an original, a real ebony fretboard.

The second thing they did was to put an adjustable truss rod in the neck. It's adjustable from inside — through the sound hole inside the head block, and not visible. Finally, they put on a staggered ivory bridge saddle. Exactly the same kinds of wood were used — Honduras mahogany for the sides and back, and German spruce for the top. The trim was fancy wood marquetry just as in the originals.

They braced these Stellas exactly like the originals and made both the tail piece version and the pin-bridge version — which actually have no structural difference. They have a tonal difference in the way the tension is working on the guitar. So, because Lundberg and Martello liked the tones of both styles, they built four of each.

On these guitars heavy gauge strings can be used as Lead Belly did, and the sound is real good. Or one can use lighter strings and tune to pitch. But if you tune *below* pitch, you wind up with no more tension than light gauge *at* pitch.

**Paul Geremia:**

My Tonk Bros. twelve-string is similar to the type by Lead Belly but actually it's the same model Blind Willie McTell is holding in his famous 1929 photograph. It has a 27-inch scale length so I can tune in low and still get enough tension. The strings are all mediums, from .013's on the first course to a .036 and a .059 on the sixth.

Most of the slide stuff I do is on the twelve-string and I prefer the sound of glass slides resulting from wine bottle necks. I will use a thumb pick for fast lead runs but never finger picks.

My twelve-string has a birch back and sides, a spruce top and a poplar neck. I made the moveable bridge out of rosewood but the original was probably of fruitwood (pear was commonly used). The neck and end blocks are oak and the tail piece is a molded right angle type as was common in the '20s.

It has a simple ladder bracing (heavy braces) and, oddly, has no bridge plate.

I think the most critical aspects regarding the great sound of the old twelve-strings are the ladder style (as opposed to X braces) bracing and the 17-inch scale length which allows it to be tuned low. I usually tune two whole tones low. This allows for the deep, yet clear and loud tone of the bass string while still having enough tension on the treble side.

The twelve-string is, to me, almost a totally different instrument from the six-string guitar. Lead Belly's style exemplifies this different in its glory. I don't find the twelve-string more difficult to play than the six-string.

**Michael Cooney:**

My feeling about the way Lead Belly played twelve-string is that, unlike most other twelve-string guitar players, Lead Belly used the instrument to its potential. "He was the only person who took advantage of the differences between a twelve-string and a six-string." He accentuated the big bass strings (sometimes played very simply) and the chunky sound of certain chords. With just about any other player (excluding those who have been influenced by the way Lead Belly played), what they played would sound about as good (played the same way) on a six-string guitar. Lead Belly stuff (played the same way on a six-string) would sound thin and sometimes silly.

By the way, I have just started to double (instead of octave) the 3rd pair of strings, after thirty years. I like it. I fancy it sounds more like the Lead Belly records.

**Eric Clapton:**

"Thirty something years ago a teenage Eric Clapton was toting his acoustic guitar from pub to pub in London and nearby towns such as Kingston, playing and singing what was then called folk blues for drinks and pocket change," wrote Robert Palmer recently in *Rolling Stone*. His idols then were Lead Belly and Bill

Broonzy. Within the last year [1992], Clapton has come full circle — and then some. He's returned to the acoustic guitar and the songs of Lead Belly and other blues man.

**Ry Cooder:**

I started in G tuning before I knew D. Probably the best song to start with is Lead Belly's 'C.C. Rider' — the thing he played flat. He chose a beautiful chord at the 9th fret to start the song on. It's perfect. He didn't move around. He played the chords and used the notes he had in that position. It's all right there. But, man, to start the song on that chord! It jumped off the record player at me. It's like looking over the edge of some cliff! And then what do we do now? The tonic. Whoo! I used to get chicken skin [goose bumps] listening to that. I used to think, "Go where it's dangerous and say *yes*," as the Yogis like to say.

**Gary Atkinson:**

I believe Lead Belly used a National steel guitar on two of his recordings.

My experience of these guitars is quite extensive, both as a collector of Nationals and recordings made featuring them. I have also contributed towards the forthcoming book by Bob Brozman, documenting the history of the National company which existed and made a wide range of resonator instruments from 1928 to 1940.

I am convinced that a National was on 'My Friend Blind Lemon' and 'Match Box Blues.' The distinctive tonal quality of the guitar is unmistakable. The National was and still is THE guitar to play slide on because of its ability to enhance and sustain notes played with a bottleneck, or in Lead Belly's case a round metal bar. On both of these tracks, Lead Belly also uses to full advantage the National's volume when playing harmonics. No other guitar can ring out harmonics like a National.

The question of which model he was using is more difficult to consider. The quality of the two recordings is slightly different. If I were to guess on 'Blind Lemon' alone I would put forward the National Duolion as the most likely candidate. This is a single resonator guitar, made of lead-coated sheet metal. Not being stainless steel the Duolion was painted. The color could vary from a very dark olive to a light metallic green "crackle" finish. The distinctive sound of the Duolion is full, loud and crisp.

'Matchbox' suggests another possibility. Here, the sound is less crisp, a more sweeter tone, moving towards the triple resonator National, known as the Tri-plate. The three small resonators, as opposed to a large single cone, placed inside a nickel-plated bell brass body, gives this guitar a more smoother, mellow tone.

The Tri-plate was National's first guitar introduced in June 1926 and Duolion began production in 1929 so both guitars would have been available for the two 1935 recordings.

Before passing final judgement, it must be considered how different any single National can sound by moving the position of the microphone. The dynamic range of a National is far greater than any other guitar. Place a microphone near the bridge and the sound is crisp and at the treble end of the tonal spectrum. Move the microphone towards the neck of the guitar and the sound quality goes much more to the bass end.

I feel that 'Matchbox' is the clearer and more faithful of the two recordings and so suggest that a National Duolion was used for both recordings. Certainly, whichever National, it is likely to have been the same model used for both recordings as they were both recorded on the same day.

**Fred Gerlach:**

In the early 50's, after I had first decided to play a twelve-string, I combed New York City pawnshops and music stores for a whole year before I found one. For the last 40 years my life has been defined by three of Lead Belly's songs: 'Fannin Street', 'Gallis Pole' and 'Good Morning Blues.' These are most important pieces of American folk music. They are not just a different rendition in Lead Belly's hands but a unique and original presentation; an artistry that brought rhythm to a high level. There is a super quality in the coordination of Lead Belly's thumb and upper fingers.

A discussion of Lead Belly's music is not complete until people understand the power, raw and total, which Lead Belly unleashed in his twelve-string play. Lead Belly's aura was considerable; it encompasses his song and falls upon one's ears and being. It's hypnotized me for 40 years.

My second album was originally to have been titled 'Textures' to convey the sense of power and physical reverberation the twelve-string emits. One is led and drawn through varied stages of ability and knowledge. The power is like a fuel source in that the twelve-string comes to life. The instrument can do things no other stringed instrument can do.

The most important thing about the current Blues resurgence and this particular incarnation is that the Lead Belly revival will allow new listeners to hear music that is pure and genuine, that emanates from real life experiences. Lead Belly's music is quality of the first order of magnitude, and the Lead Belly revival is an opportunity for his music to be restored. One's goal must always be to aim for quality.

**James Dickey:**

The great thing about Lead Belly is that he plays simply but he makes it sound good. Lead Belly's the crown prince of that sort of simplicity. The more I hear him, the better I like him. My favorite thing is the sound of his guitar. He could make his 12-string sound like a big freight train coming down the track.

49 Murdock Court, Apt #1J,
Beach Haven At Brighton,
Brooklyn, 23, New York,
Novembre 15th, 1950

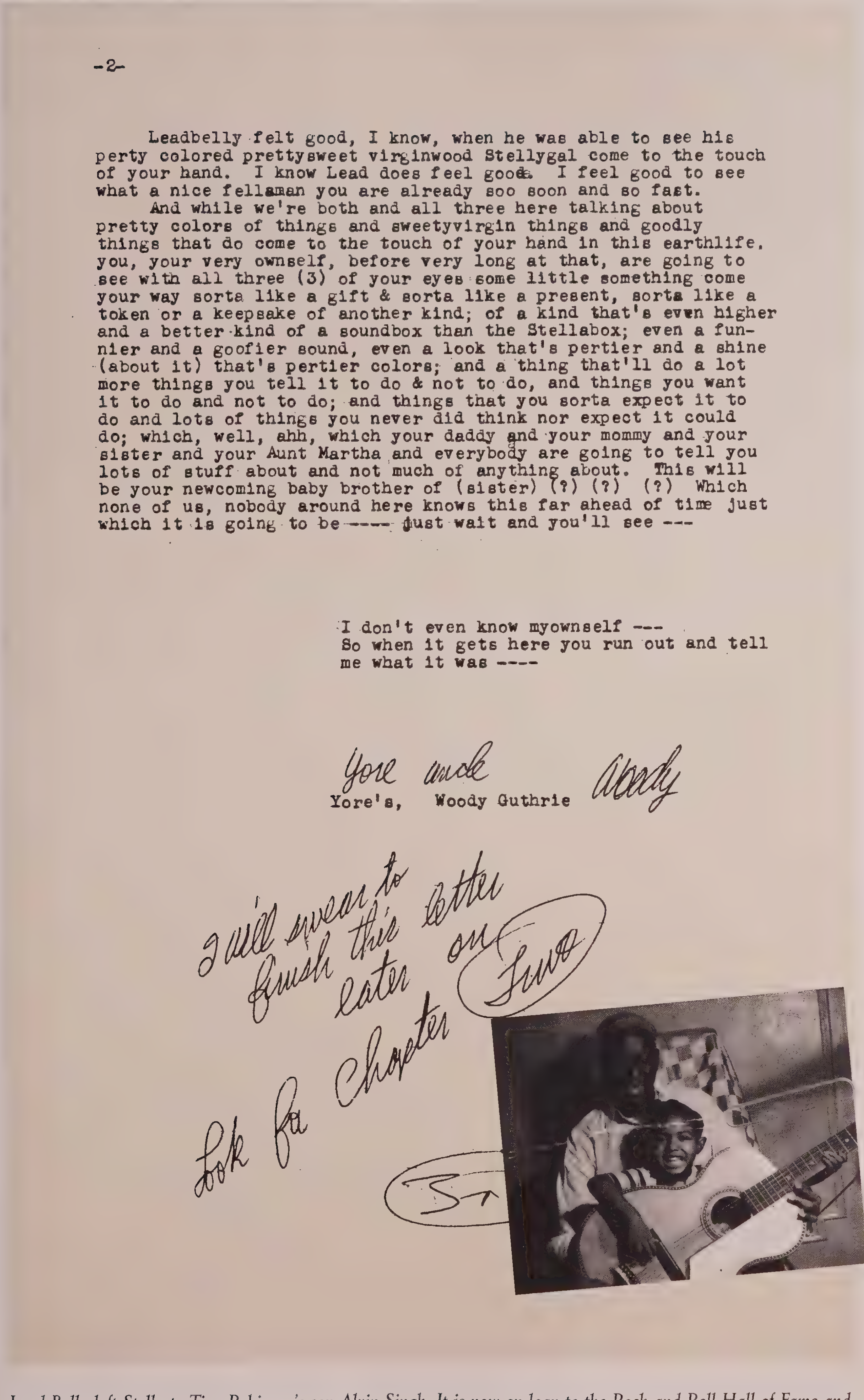
Dear Marthy,
Dear Alvin;
Dear Teenya & All:

I sure felt a good feeling when I saw all of you once more again, and, after such a long spell of being apart (not seeing any of you) well, it made me feel just that much better, I guess, to see all of you looking so gay, chipper, perty, and friendly and bright as ever in your spirits.

I found all of my tribe and herd okay when I got back home today and I found, too boot, that I'd been missing all of them and their sassy faces, and their dirty diapers and duds that run me so crazey so many times a day when I'm here to man the pump and to wade and walk around in all of it (& to clean up some parts of it allP).

Dear Alvin: I sure am glad to see how big and what a fine man you have growed up to be. I'm glad to hear that you do remember how my son (Joady Ben or Arlo Davy) played the mouthharp with you when all of you were just little bitty babies, like you talked about to me today there when I was so sleepy, remember? Gosh all getout, you did stay, like I hoped you would, just as good to look at, I mean, just as handsome as you've always been, (except only) that you've got bigger here and yandero and wider and longer up&down and all over youreself. You'll be such a big feller pertysoon now that you can pick up your Leadbelly Guitar (Sweet Stella) and get prettier musick and songs out of her than anybody that's ever laid aticky hand on her. I just cant get over how big you've jumped up and growed out, and how much more I am waiting to see and hear and listen to you play Leadbelly's Twelve stringer just as good as he ever did and just as fine as he wants you to play on it. I've touched the Stellabox a time or two, and I'm one of the onlyest men oj this earth that he did ever let lay a finger on it; simply because he did not allow very many of his best friends even to lay a stray hand or finger on his Stellabox; and, because, he was afraid you might scrathch her or you might skin her or you might scar her or bruise her some way or another; and, like Leadbelly, I, myownself, will tell you and I'll also swear and avow and state for this world to listen to; that when he passed his Stellagirl and his Stellalady on unto your hand and into your keeping he passed onto you the finest and the best and the greatest gift (outside of Sweet Marthy) his lifetime had blessed him with. I know that you will think of all of these things and plenty more good things when you pick up that guitar and play and sing on it and along with it like all of this world of us have heard and have watched and seen him play and sing on it.

You are a specialbornd man of somehigh kind, Alvin, I know that now, when I think tonight of how Leadbelly picked you to be the man to give his big gittar to. Everytime I come over to 10th Street there to see you and your folks and your street and your park and all, yessire man, I say to myself, now Leadbelly sure did have a good eye and a good nose and a good handfeel for good fellows like you, I mean, well, Alvin, when he loved you so much and thought so much of you as to make you the boy good enough to receive the prize of his whole lifetime and the best gift anyboy ever did get, anywhere, anytime, from anybody of high or low degree; to ask you to be the son, the laddy, the boy out of several million of them that would jump, skip, hoop and holler, scream and yelp, and be tickled to death to (be the one) Leadbelly picked to give his guitar onto. I know from the few times I've played a bbit of a tune on the Stella that she is one of the tiptop finest made and truest toned, easiest played, loudest and deepest boomingtone bass, and treble (both) which my rambling finger tried to find the groove. You just watch this fella, Alvine's dust, watch his smoke, and you'll see how right Leadbelly was all along.



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Leadbelly felt good, I know, when he was able to see his perty colored prettysweet virginwood Stellygal come to the touch of your hand. I know Lead does feel good. I feel good to see what a nice fellaman you are already soo soon and so fast.

And while we're both and all three here talking about pretty colors of things and sweetyvirgin things and goodly things that do come to the touch of your hand in this earthlife. you, your very ownself, before very long at that, are going to see with all three (3) of your eyes some little something come your way sorta like a gift & sorta like a present, sorta like a token or a keepsake of another kind; of a kind that's evwn higher and a better kind of a soundbox than the Stellabox; even a funnier and a goofier sound, even a look that's pertier and a shine (about it) that's pertier colors; and a thing that'll do a lot more things you tell it to do & not to do, and things you want it to do and not to do; and things that you sorta expect it to do and lots of things you never did think nor expect it could do; which, well, ahh, which your daddy and your mommy and your sister and your Aunt Martha and everybody are going to tell you lots of stuff about and not much of anything about. This will be your newcoming baby brother of (sister) (?) (?) (?) Which none of us, nobody around here knows this far ahead of time just which it is going to be ---- just wait and you'll see ---

I don't even know myownself ---
So when it gets here you run out and tell
me what it was ----

Yore uncle
Yore's, Woody Guthrie Woody

I will swear to
finish this letter
later on

Look for Chapter Two

*Lead Belly left Stella to Tiny Robinson's son Alvin Singh. It is now on loan to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio*

This newlycome brother-sister thing is going to look a goodbit like your Stellabox; I mean, they've got a shape that is a good deal alike in lots of ways; you'll see that both of them has got a neck and both will have a body just about the same shape and both of them are going to have soundholes a great deal alike; and the skin around the outside will be about alike except that the baby is going to feel just a weemite slicker and smoother and warmer to your hand than the Stelly will feel; and when you try to feel or to see what is going on inside that little sounder holeofathing you will always, as I've always done, found there are a bunch of strings attached to it, and, if you finger and handle the strings just exactly easy enough and just exactly right, the strings will put off a sound like something nice and sweet and juicey and if you touch the strings wrong, I mean, rough, or tough, or too hard, or too this or too that, well, the sounds it will make won't be what you'd call perty sounds, not sounds that are nice to listen to; not sounds like any kind of a timebeat nor a good rythmn to them.

Those are mostly the ways that your newcome Stella and your newcomeer baby (sister or brother) are alike. I know that you will find out, too, a lot more ways in which your Stella and your baby are not much alike.

Your Stellagal never will eat nor drink half as much as your little baby will. Your Stella won't dirtyup near as many clothes and duds and dyaperz as your baby will. Your Stella will not make as much water around over your floor as your little baby is going to. Your Stella will keep herself pretty clean without using up all the soapywaters in this world. Your Stella will make a sound that people will give you money to hear, and you'll give all of your money out just to listen to your baby make sounds. Your Stellagal will put a little money in your landlords hands so he'll not kick your baby and your daddy and your mommy out onto the sidewalks with all of your furnitures. Your Stella will bring in a lot and your baby will bring in just a little bit, yes, just a tinnsey bit more. That is the funny part of this whole thing.

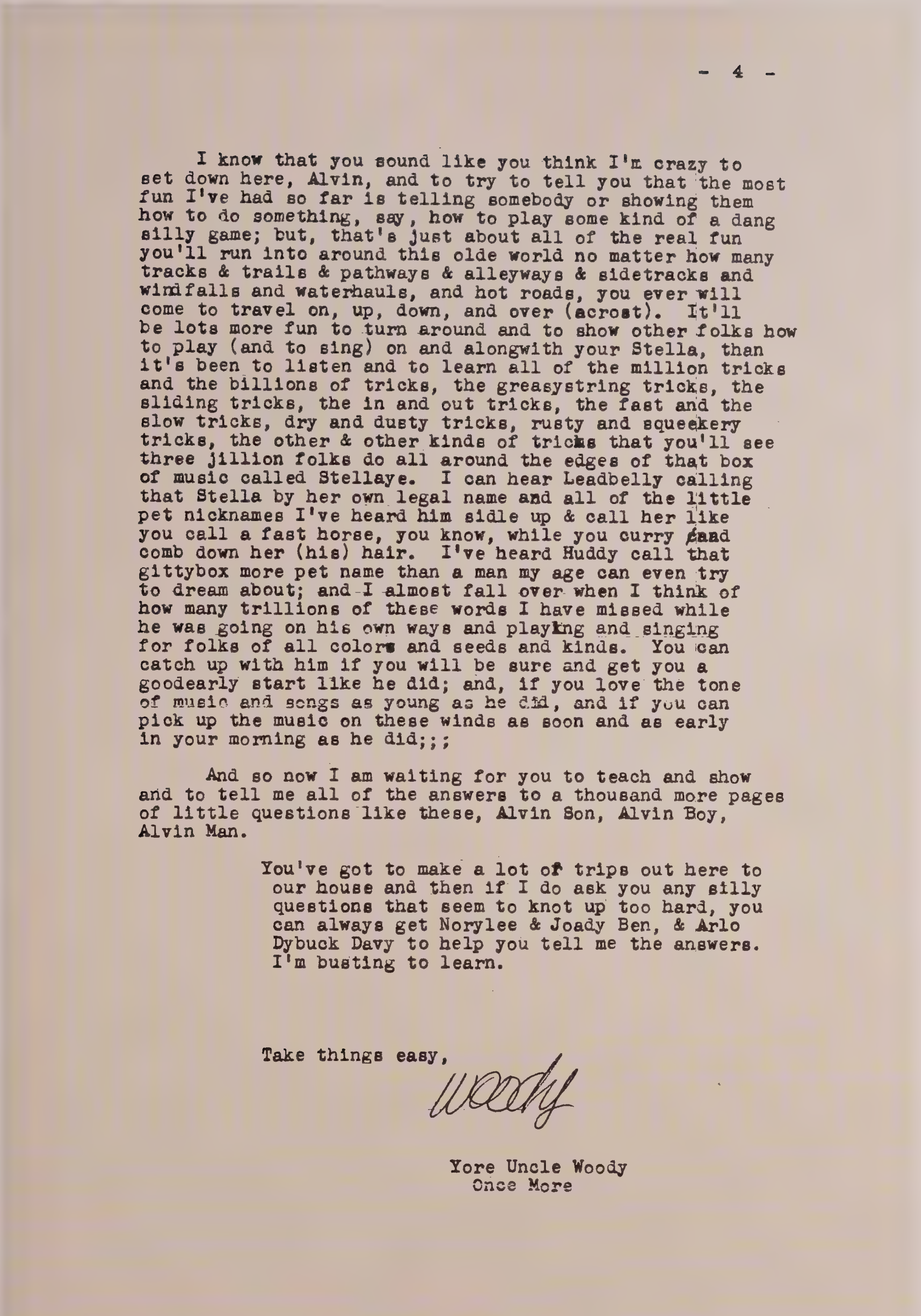
You are gonna think this world and all its little blue ribbons about your Stellagal, yepsir Alvino, and you're gonna think just a little drop, just a little ounce more about your newly come baby friend there.

And that's the funnist part of the whole affair.

That's what's funny about the whole works.

You cant play cops & robbers, nor play cowboy & outlaw, very much with your Stella, the way that you'll play lots of games of all kinds with your newbaby. I don't mean you can play cowboy & outlaw nor cops and robbers neither one with the babyfriend right this minute, not right now; but, well, you can play little ggoogoo games and peekeye games and hiding and finding games, and all kinds of teasing and clowning games with it, well, just about the first few days it gets into your house; of course, you'll just have to watch what your ma and paw and all the neighbors do (when they play with the baby), before you can learn what all kinds of games you can play with it. You can't throw it around like in a football game nor a basketball game, nor a baseball game, as far as that goes, but you can show it & teach (it) how to play all of these ruff and tumble games, and that is the most fun you'll ever have, I mean, having some regular pal and buddy right there in your own house, you know, to show and to teadh and to teach and to show, (which is the funniest part of the whole thing)

The very most fun I've ever had so far in my 38 years of hard traveling is to (try) to show my new babies how you play games and stuff.



I know that you sound like you think I'm crazy to set down here, Alvin, and to try to tell you that the most fun I've had so far is telling somebody or showing them how to do something, say, how to play some kind of a dang silly game; but, that's just about all of the real fun you'll run into around this olde world no matter how many tracks & trails & pathways & alleyways & sidetracks and windfalls and waterhauls, and hot roads, you ever will come to travel on, up, down, and over (acrost). It'll be lots more fun to turn around and to show other folks how to play (and to sing) on and alongwith your Stella, than it's been to listen and to learn all of the million tricks and the billions of tricks, the greasystring tricks, the sliding tricks, the in and out tricks, the fast and the slow tricks, dry and dusty tricks, rusty and squeekery tricks, the other & other kinds of tricks that you'll see three jillion folks do all around the edges of that box of music called Stellaye. I can hear Leadbelly calling that Stella by her own legal name and all of the little pet nicknames I've heard him sidle up & call her like you call a fast horse, you know, while you curry and comb down her (his) hair. I've heard Huddy call that gittybox more pet name than a man my age can even try to dream about; and I almost fall over when I think of how many trillions of these words I have missed while he was going on his own ways and playing and singing for folks of all colors and seeds and kinds. You can catch up with him if you will be sure and get you a goodearly start like he did; and, if you love the tone of music and songs as young as he did, and if you can pick up the music on these winds as soon and as early in your morning as he did;;;

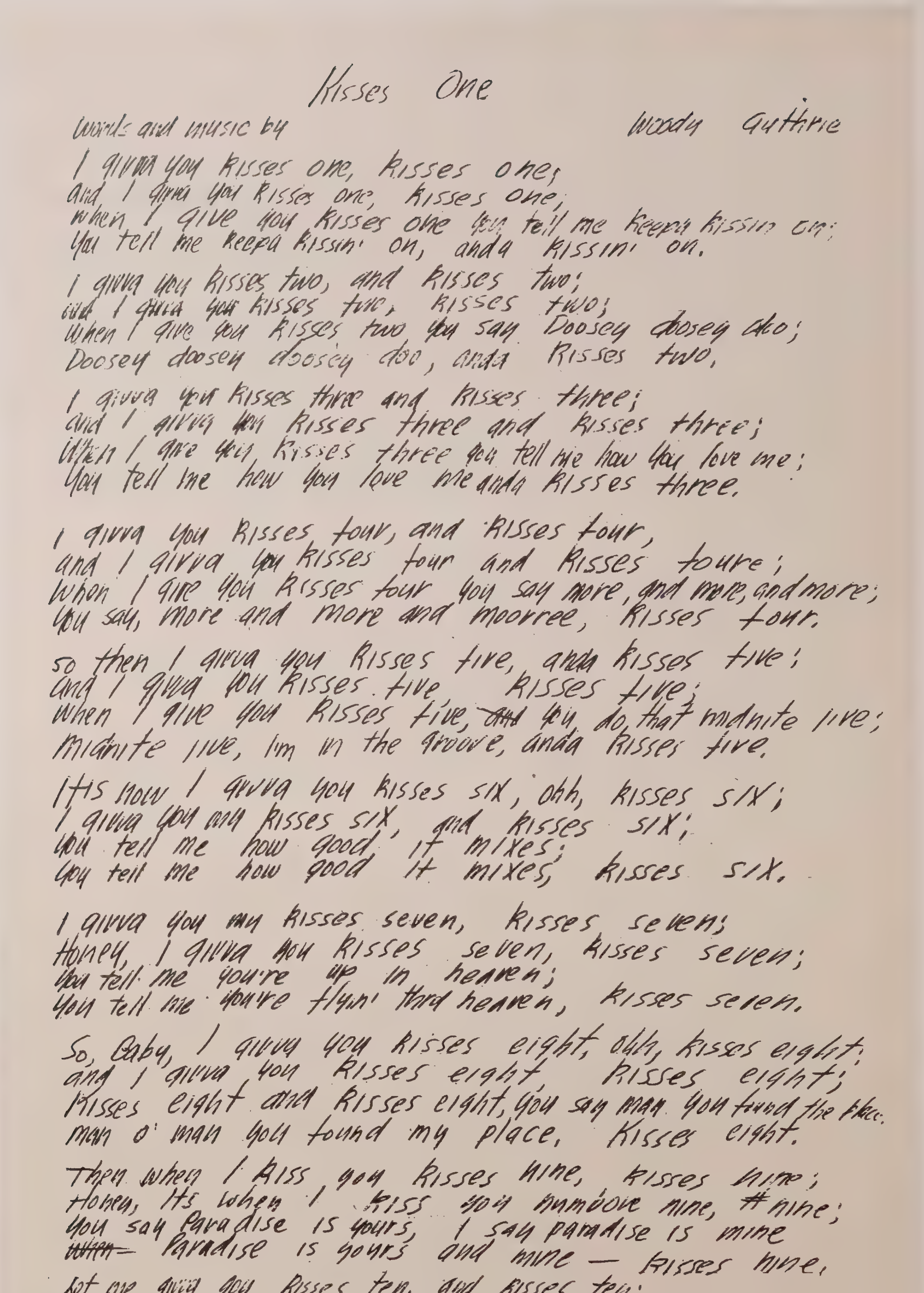
And so now I am waiting for you to teach and show and to tell me all of the answers to a thousand more pages of little questions like these, Alvin Son, Alvin Boy, Alvin Man.

You've got to make a lot of trips out here to our house and then if I do ask you any silly questions that seem to knot up too hard, you can always get Norylee & Joady Ben, & Arlo Dybuck Davy to help you tell me the answers. I'm busting to learn.

Take things easy,

Woody

Yore Uncle Woody
Once More



# Kisses One

Words and music by Woody Guthrie

I givva you kisses one, kisses one;
and I givva you kisses one, kisses one;
when I give you kisses one you tell me keepa kissin on;
You tell me keepa kissin' on, anda kissin' on.

I givva you kisses two, and kisses two;
and I givva you kisses two, kisses two;
When I give you kisses two you say Doosey doosey doo;
Doosey doosey doosey doo, anda kisses two.

I givva you kisses three and kisses three;
and I givva you kisses three and kisses three;
When I give you kisses three you tell me how you love me;
You tell me how you love me anda kisses three.

I givva you kisses four, and kisses four,
and I givva you kisses four and kisses foure;
When I give you kisses four you say more, and more, and more;
You say, more and more and moorree, kisses four.

So then I givva you kisses five, anda kisses five;
And I givva you kisses five, kisses five;
When I give you kisses five, ~~and~~ you do that midnite jive;
Midnite jive, I'm in the groove, anda kisses five.

Its now I givva you kisses six, ohh, kisses six;
I givva you my kisses six, and kisses six;
You tell me how good it mixes;
You tell me how good it mixes, kisses six.

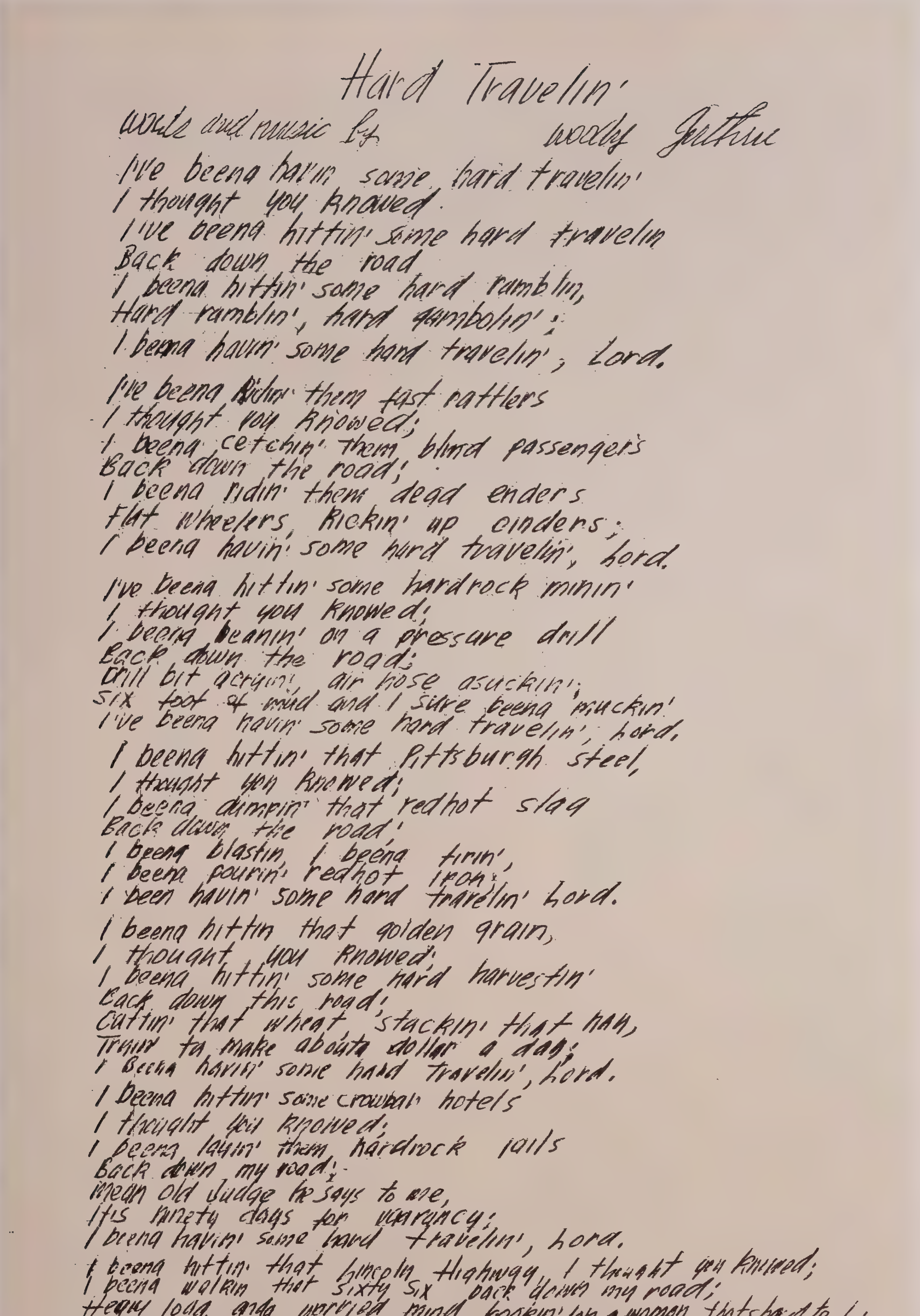
I givva you my kisses seven, kisses seven;
Honey, I givva you kisses seven, kisses seven;
You tell me you're up in heaven;
You tell me you're flyin' third heaven, kisses seven.

So, Baby, I givva you kisses eight, ohh, kisses eight;
and I givva you kisses eight, kisses eight;
Kisses eight and kisses eight, you say man you found the place;
man o' man you found my place, kisses eight.

Then when I kiss you kisses nine, kisses nine;
Honey, Its when I kiss you nummoove nine, #nine;
You say paradise is yours, I say paradise is mine
~~when~~ — Paradise is yours and mine — kisses nine.

Let me givva you kisses ten, and kisses ten;
Let me givva you kisses ten, ohh, kisses ten;
Kisses ten, kisses ten, and we'll both go round again
Kisses one — to kisses ten — anda kisses ten.

end



# Hard Travelin'

words and music by woody Guthrie

I've beena havin' some hard travelin'
I thought you knowed.
I've beena hittin' some hard travelin
Back down the road
I beena hittin' some hard ramblin,
Hard ramblin', hard gambolin';
I beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

I've beena ridin' them fast rattlers
I thought you knowed;
I beena cetchin' them blind passengers
Back down the road;
I beena ridin' them dead enders
Flat wheelers, kickin' up cinders;
I beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

I've beena hittin' some hardrock minin'
I thought you knowed;
I beena leanin' on a pressure drill
Back down the road;
Drill bit acryin', air hose asuckin';
Six foot of mud and I sure beena muckin'
I've beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

I beena hittin' that Pittsburgh steel,
I thought you knowed;
I beena dumpin' that redhot slag
Back down the road;
I beena blastin, I beena firin',
I beena pourin' redhot iron;
I been havin' some hard travelin' Lord.

I beena hittin that golden grain,
I thought you knowed;
I beena hittin' some hard harvestin'
Back down this road;
Cuttin' that wheat, stackin' that hay,
Tryin' ta make abouta dollar a day;
I beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

I beena hittin' some crowbar hotels
I thought you knowed;
I beena layin' them hardrock jails
Back down my road;
mean old Judge he says to me,
It's ninety days for vagrancy;
I beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

I beena hittin that Lincoln Highway, I thought you knowed;
I beena walkin that Sixty Six back down my road;
Heavy load anda worried mind, lookin' for a woman thats hard to find
I beena havin' some hard travelin', Lord.

End

*Tiny Robinson with Stella*

### Lead Belly's Stella was the tip-top finest made and truest toned

Lead Belly was a natural-born musician. He played many stringed instruments — mandolin, six-string guitar, string bass — and the piano, harmonica and accordion. A family story recalls how as a boy he would whittle a reed from Caddo Lake into a flute and make music with it. When he was twenty-five and partnering with Blind Lemon Jefferson he heard the twelve-string guitar and knew it was the sound he had sought. For the next thirty-five years lead Belly's instrument of choice was the twelve-string guitar, and its orchestra of sound.

When Lead Belly came North in Fall 1934 he had his well worn twelve-string Stella with him. This "old green box" had served him long and well. But now he needed a new instrument as he started a new career, and befitting the 'King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World.'

Before the start of his college tour in March 1935, Lead Belly traveled to Jersey City, 87–101 Ferry Street, where Oscar Schmidt, Inc. had been making musical instruments since 1879. Of particular interest to Lead Belly was their Stella twelve-string guitar. In Dallas in about 1915 he had paid $12 for a second-hand twelve-string.

In the 1930s Stella guitars, six- and twelve-string, were priced from $7 to $15. The Stella model was not top of the line (the Sovereign was) as manufactured by Oscar Schmidt, Inc. In 1935 John Carner bought the guitar holdings of Oscar Schmidt, Inc.; in 1939 he sold including rights to the brand name Stella to Harmony which continued producing the Stella line.

In 1939 the Stella twelve-string guitar by Harmony sold for $12.50 and was advertised as "always a standard for quality at a low price." "Known favorably to guitar players for 50 years, the famous 'Stella' guitars are now presented in improved models. Many familiar decorations and shadings are retained and the tonal qualities and the sturdiness which the 'Stella' name as an instrument has ever signified."

After more than twenty years' experience, Lead Belly knew what he wanted in an instrument when he acquired his new mahogany guitar. He didn't want the green shading, but he did want the strength and durability and performance he had always found in a Stella. The guitar he obtained in Jersey City carried a "Stella Co." label inside. This twelve-string is the instrument used by Lead Belly beginning with the March 25, 1935 recordings for the American Record Company (ARC) (Columbia's ancestor) in New York. Prior to this date on earlier Library of Congress recordings he had used his "old green box." Listening closely perhaps you can hear a comparative difference in sound.

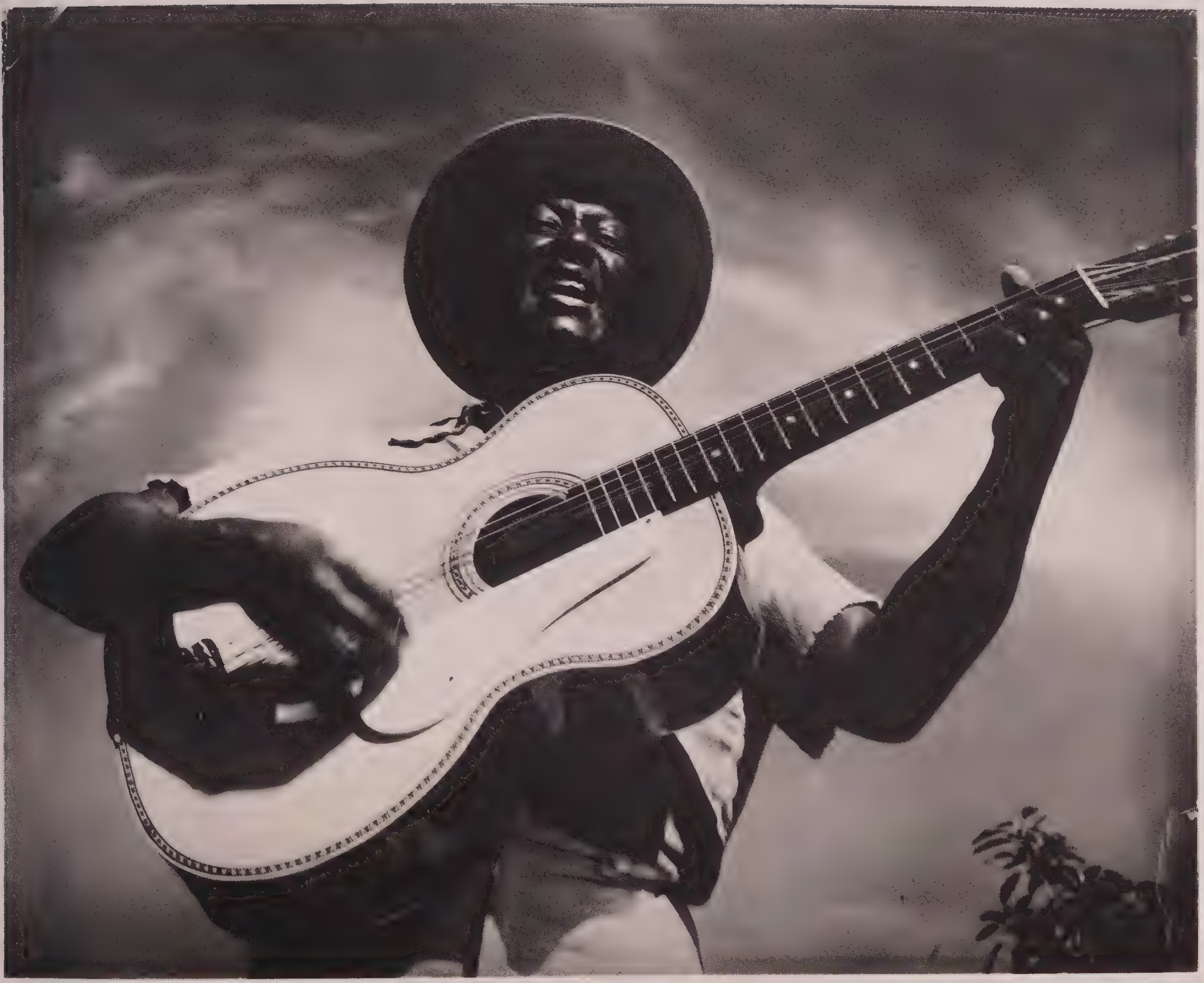
Woody Guthrie had lived and visited frequently at the Ledbetter apartment. He was familiar with Lead Belly's instrument and eulogized it, and in so doing lauded Lead Belly. Guthrie believed Lead Belly's Stella was the tip top finest made and truest toned.

No less eloquently forty years later is the opening paragraph in their special chapter on Lead Belly by George Gruhn and Walter Carter in their definitive work, *American Stringed Instruments: An Illustrated History* (Miller Freeman, 1993):

*"There were twelve-string guitars and guitarists before Lead Belly's time, and there are twelve-strings still made today, more than forty years after his death, but for all practical purposes the twelve-string market owes its existence to one musician and one instrument. Lead Belly is single-handedly responsible for the very survival of the twelve-string guitar today in American popular music — an accomplishment no other musician can claim."*

Lead Belly's twelve-string Stella guitar remains in perfect condition to this day. The spirit of all his music still resonates and is etched, like scrimshaw, into the instrument. There are some wear marks on the wood where he held it against his body, testimony to the fact that he played it every day. And every day Lead Belly's Stella gave witness to his artistic expression.

**Sean Killeen**



*Lead Belly as he appeared in a 1945 film by Blanding Sloan and Wah Mong Chang singing three of his best known songs. The only other film footage of Lead Belly known to exist are two short features done for the "March of Time" news series in 1935*

# RELAX YOUR MIND

*"Thank you sir, boss, thank you! I'll drive you all over the United States and I'll sing all my songs for you. You be my big boss and I'll be your man. Thank you, sir, thank you, sir!"*

## Talking to Myself

*Lead Belly.* "He was foreman, what we call straw boss of the work gang. 'At's how he got his name Lead Belly. Him an' Sleepy John Estes. He'd sit under the tree while the other guys did the work. His hips was gettin' full of lead."

> Take this hammer, take it to the captain
> Tell 'im I'm gone, tell 'im I'm gone…

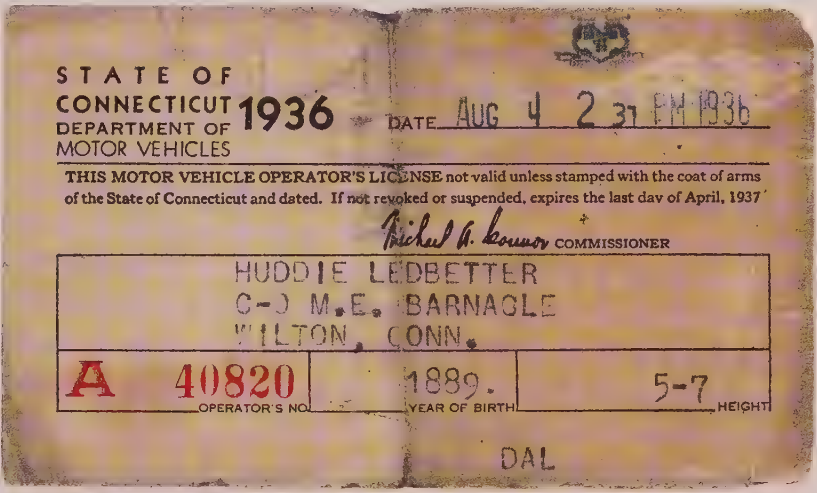
It isn't sung Lead Belly's way. Bill is singing it his way. A different tempo, a different feel. Yet, it's a work song, all right. Both men did more than their share of it. I'm thinking of Lead Belly, as Bill remembers him.

Lead Belly is driving the car. Duke of Iron, the Calypso singer, and I are in the back seat. We have come from a concert in Urbana, at the University of Illinois. Pete Seeger, Brownie McGhee, and Betty Sanders are in the other car. Lead Belly is driving pretty fast, too fast. He has the unfortunate tendency of looking backwards as he talks. Stupidly, I ask him about an early experience. He delights in telling the story, as he gestures with one hand. The other is lightly on the wheel. *He is looking directly at us.* We're hitting about eighty miles an hour. Duke and I are terrified. We cling to one another. In his precise West Indian dialect, Duke pleads, "Oh, please, Huddie Ledbetter, please do not look at us." I'm too scared to say anything. "Is that a Mack truck coming our way?" We are zigzagging on either side of the white line. Lead Belly is driving the car as though it were a tractor. He is in high good humor. How we reach Chicago in one piece is something I have not yet quite figured out. Lead Belly enjoyed the trip.

> If he asks you was I laughin'
> Tell 'im I was crying…

Song ended, the murmur: "He's gone."
Time out. Time out for all of us.

**Studs Terkel**



STATE OF
CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF
MOTOR VEHICLES
1936
DATE AUG 4 2 31 PM 1936

THIS MOTOR VEHICLE OPERATOR'S LICENSE not valid unless stamped with the coat of arms of the State of Connecticut and dated. If not revoked or suspended, expires the last day of April, 1937

Michael A. Connor COMMISSIONER

HUDDIE LEDBETTER
C-O M.E. BARNAGLE
WILTON, CONN.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A 40820<br>OPERATOR'S NO | 1889.<br>YEAR OF BIRTH | 5-7<br>HEIGHT |

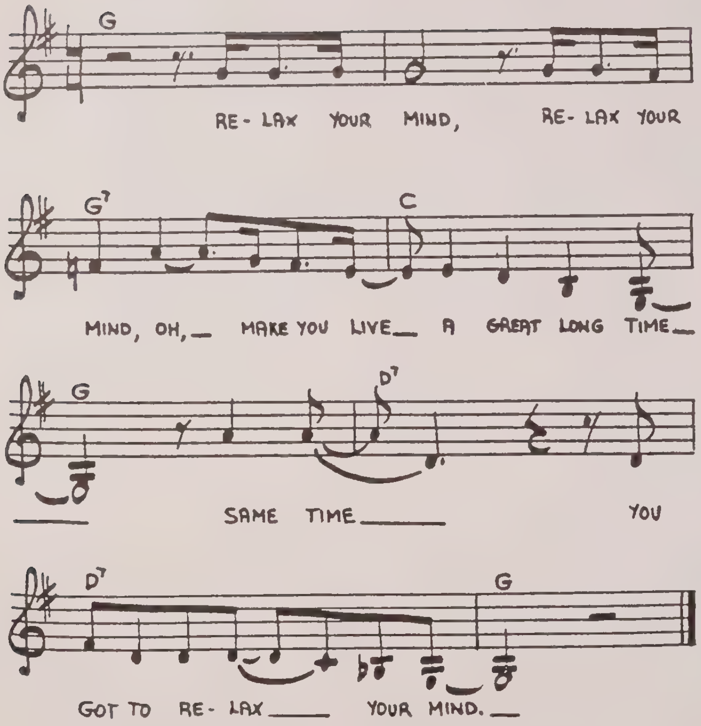
DAL

*Lead Belly driver's licence from 1936*

When you Drive your automobile

## RELAX YOUR MIND

Words and Music by Huddie Ledbetter
© by Folkways Music, Inc.


G
RE- LAX YOUR MIND, RE- LAX YOUR
G7
C
MIND, OH, MAKE YOU LIVE A GREAT LONG TIME
G
D7
SAME TIME YOU
D7
G
GOT TO RE- LAX YOUR MIND.

When the light turns green,
Oh, push down on your gasoline,
One time you got to relax your mind.

When the light turns red,
Oh, shove your brakes down to the bed,
One time you got to relax your mind.

Relax your mind, relax your mind,
Oh, make you feel so fine some time,
Some time you got to relax your mind.

When you're driving in an automobile,
Oh, keep your eyes out through that
windshield,
That's the time you got to relax your
mind.

Once was a man crossin' a railroad
track,
Oh, boy, and he forgot to relax,
That's one time he shoulda relaxed
his mind.

Relax your mind, relax your
mind,
Oh, make you feel just as fine as
wine,
Sometime you gotta relax your
mind.

(Repeat first verse)

Lead Belly wrote "Relax Your Mind," hoping it might be adopted by the National Automobile Safety Council. He had been prompted to write it by the National Automobile Safety Council. They encouraged him to write it, and then they turned him down. It was a dirty deal. Here was this guy from the Council and he was not doing Lead Belly any particular good, leading him on with false hopes.

*Relax Your Mind, Words and Music by Huddie Ledbetter, ©1963 (renewed),*
*Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., New York, N.Y.*

# The Leadbelly Method

When the great American folk singer Leadbelly felt like killing a man, which was, for understandable reasons, a lot more often that you or I might, he prevented a murder from taking place simply by relaxing his mind.

When Leadbelly felt like beating his wife, which was very infrequently, he just relaxed his mind and soon they were back in one another's arms.

When somebody called Leadbelly a nigger, which was pretty often in those days, he just relaxed his mind and realized that the person had made the most impersonal possible sort of generalization about him, which was, upon reflection, an unintentional compliment. Besides, it was a good thing the man didn't call him a motherfucker because he might have gone automatic on him and then he would have had to work a lot harder to relax his mind.

When Leadbelly didn't like the acoustics in the hall and everyone was yelling for "Goodnight Irene," Leadbelly just relaxed his mind and sang it so that the room sounded good.

When a salesman tried to sell him a vacuum cleaner, or when the rain went on for days, or when the cops parked outside his window, when there was an eclipse of the moon in Scorpio, when his eyes were burning from reading Nietzsche, Leadbelly relaxed his mind.

When Alan Freed stole songwriting credit from Chuck Berry, when the Titanic went down, when John Lennon got shot, when the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo, when the White Sox threw the World Series, when the wolf was at the door, Leadbelly just relaxed his mind.

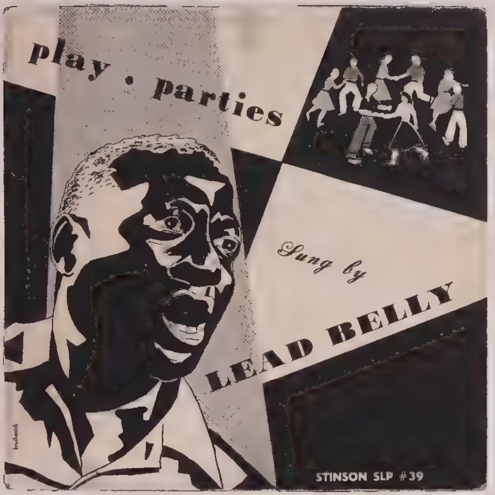
In order to facilitate the relaxation of his mind, Leadbelly gave up whiskey in his later years. Beer, however, he found to be a useful although optional tool in the relaxation of his mind.

Leadbelly's dying words were: "*I have never felt better in my life.*"

Glenn O'Brien

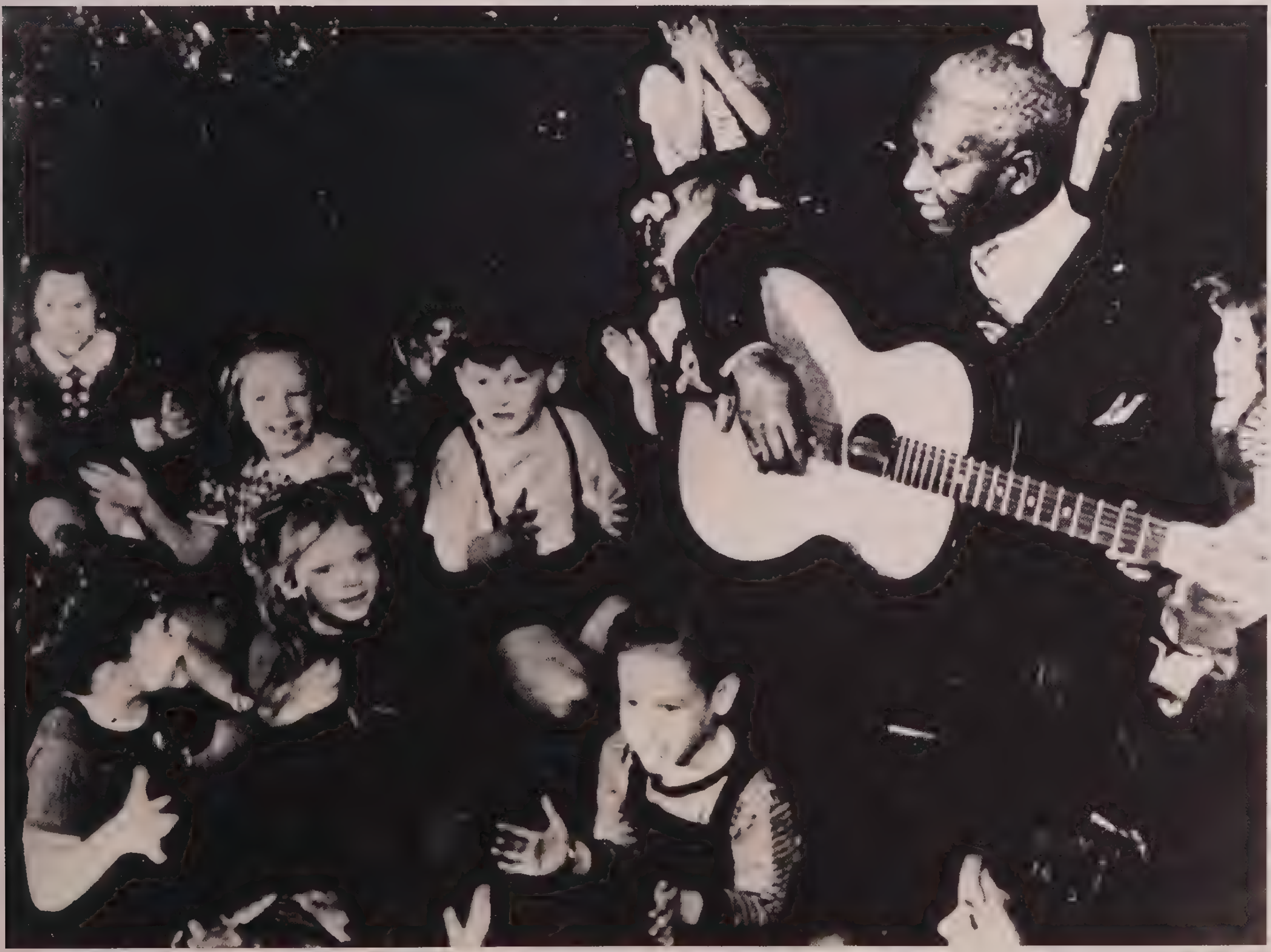
# LEAD BELLY KNOWS HOW KIDS ARE

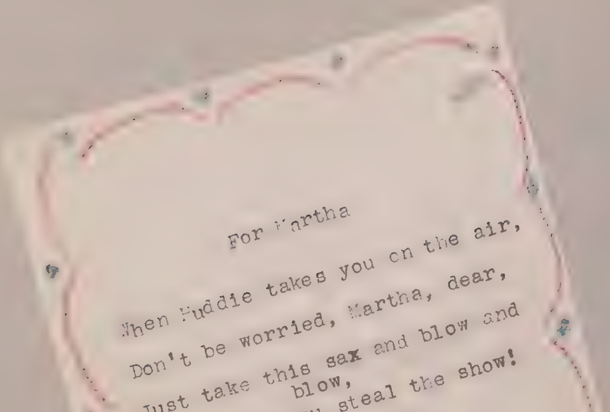
*"I love to sing and play. Seems I never get tired."*


play · parties
Sung by
LEAD BELLY
STINSON SLP #39

Lead Belly's greatest pleasure is singing with children. When Lead Belly gets together with a bunch of three, four and five-year-olds, there's the biggest party imaginable. The children sing and dance and clap their hands to the music and everyone has a wonderful time. "I love kids," said Lead Belly, "I know how they are."

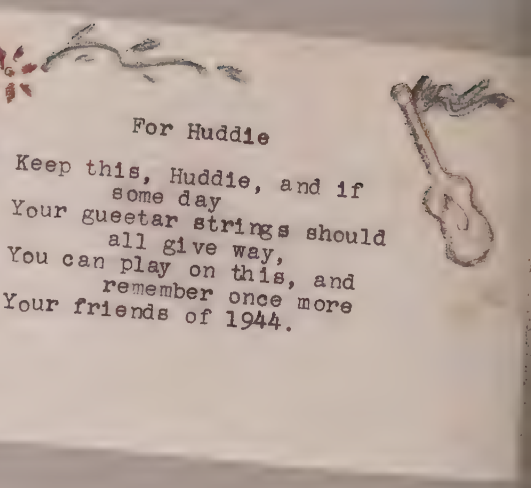
**Mason Roberson**





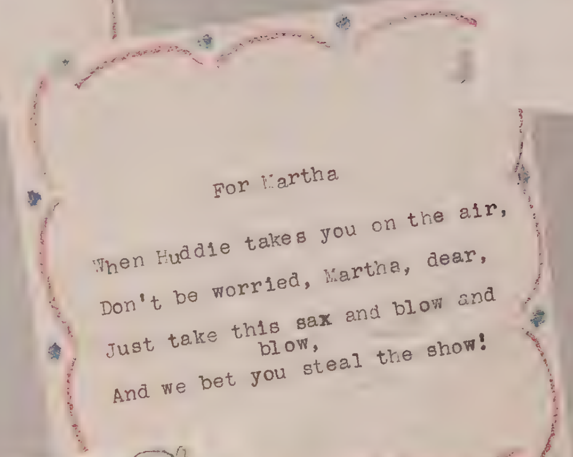
For Martha

When Huddie takes you on the air,
Don't be worried, Martha, dear,
Just take this sax and blow and
blow,
And we bet you steal the show!



For Huddie

Keep this, Huddie, and if
some day
Your gueetar strings should
all give way,
You can play on this, and
remember once more
Your friends of 1944.



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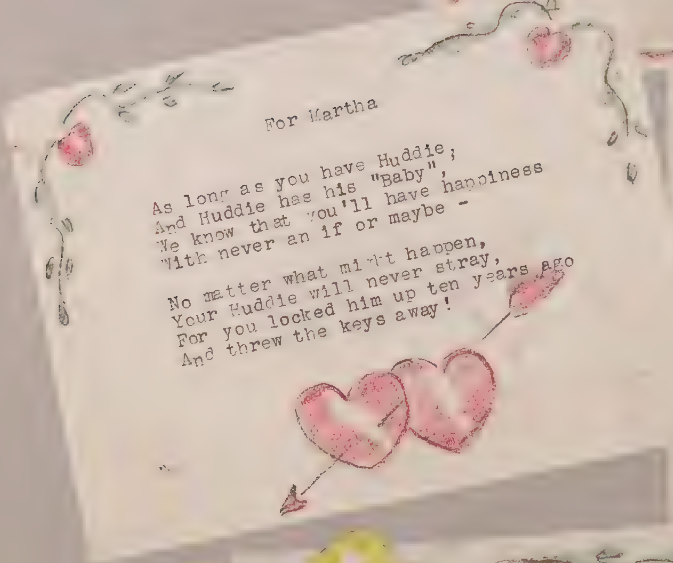
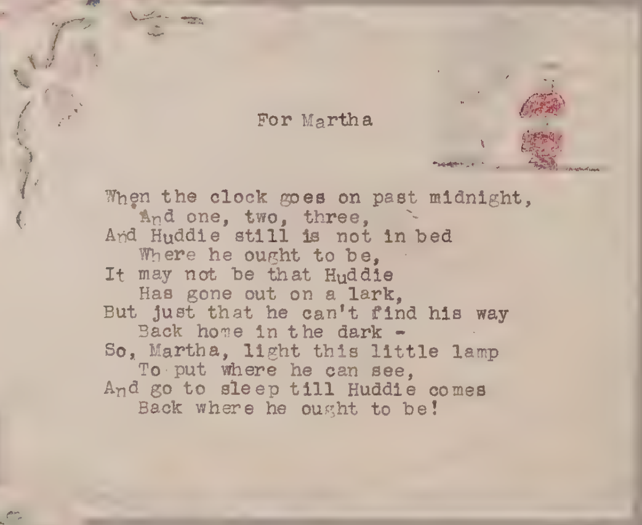


For Martha

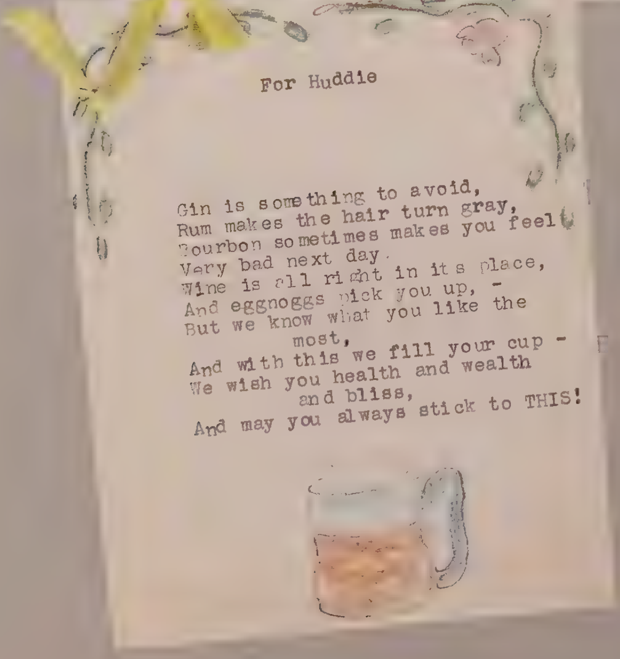
As long as you have Huddie,
And Huddie has his "Baby",
We know that you'll have happiness
With never an if or maybe -

No matter what might happen,
Your Huddie will never stray,
For you locked him up ten years ago
And threw the keys away!



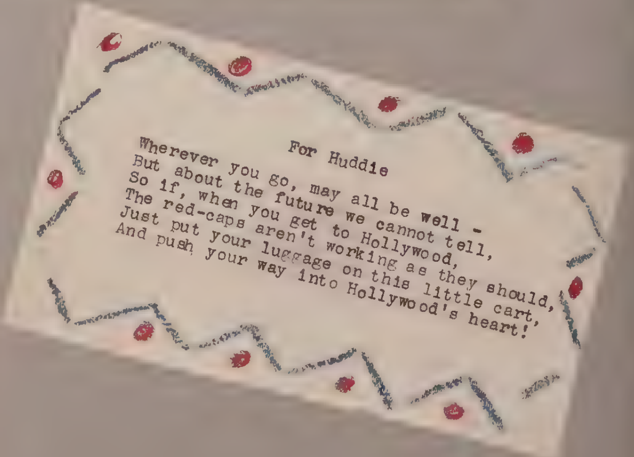
For Martha

When the clock goes on past midnight,
And one, two, three,
And Huddie still is not in bed
Where he ought to be,
It may not be that Huddie
Has gone out on a lark,
But just that he can't find his way
Back home in the dark -
So, Martha, light this little lamp
To put where he can see,
And go to sleep till Huddie comes
Back where he ought to be!



For Huddie

Gin is something to avoid,
Rum makes the hair turn gray,
Bourbon sometimes makes you feel
Very bad next day.
Wine is all right in its place,
And eggnoggs pick you up, -
But we know what you like the
most,
And with this we fill your cup -
We wish you health and wealth
and bliss,
And may you always stick to THIS!



For Huddie

Wherever you go, may all be well -
But about the future we cannot tell,
So if, when you get to Hollywood,
The red-caps aren't working as they should,
Just put your luggage on this little cart,
And push your way into Hollywood's heart!

# HOLLYWOOD

*"First time I saw Huddie, was down in Louisian'.*
*He was working and singing, you'd tell he was a man.*
*An' now he's bound for Hollywood."*
**Marjorie Fairbanks**

## Ticket to Hollywood

Ebony face, white hair proudly combed;
Guitar held tight or tossed as gesture;
Feet tamping to swell loquacious
and precise volume of one-man-show —
Lead Belly, you've attained ticket to Hollywood,
city reeling magic to far villages.
The ticket's unclipped coupons read
"Chicago, Council Bluffs, Cheyenne":
Pegs to a concentrated Wonderland
where handsome Irenes
lavish of limb, hair and mascara,
are said-goodnight-to
by the world's pleasure gamblers.
You like the adjective "black";
In your distinguished pride, inheritance
and artistry you reject henna to change
your voluminous unified vitality.
Dollars won't convert you to the bourgeoisie
that uses race and college rah-rah
as ticket to its facade-land
of empty price and other emptiness.
Your dollars are going south
to buy home for eight children
of wife Martha's twin sister;
for each of her twin's childbirths
Martha endured an operation, says she:
"Everything happening to her, happens to me!"
Poet, twin to some Lead Belly,
scorns ticket to his proper Hollywood…
Is frosted if Fame transports him
to unanimity of praise;
But is warm in anonymity
where as in youth's wanderyears
he chooses his going and coming,
and companions of any age or sex
who would fall away
before Fame and impressive ticket.
He prefers to travel the rails,
or by bus before front window —
Especially when spring-tree fuzz
and hill mist assemble themselves intimately.
He'd frequent The Bowery, a marble library
or renew hallucinations wherein
four parts of himself talk to each other.
He'd keep his honk-honk laughter
the fluttering, yawking thing —
Goose-like, belly-engendered —
which resembles Irish minstrel's "Oh, Oh!"
He'd continue in his clown's role,
failing at everything
but a gusto for make-believe.
Why let Fame's fixity place him
within neuter possession of the many?
Fame's a synthetic food, he claims,
thinning the blood;
How may he re-chew what his appetites
already have swallowed and spewed?
But poet must take couponed ticket
to his Hollywood equivalent
Must Follow a Lead Belly, his twin and usher;
Must let a glamorizer adopt
and thumb his word children…
Let his mist and tree-fuzz go technicolor.
And let himself bow in the reel

> *"Lead Belly is one of the most important things in my life. His music is so raw and sincere. It's something that I hold really sacred to me. I'm totally obsessed with him. He's my favorite performer."*
> **Kurt Cobain**

LEADBELLY
REALISTIC
2-8
Leadbelly

*Kurt Cobain's most treasured cassette by "My favorite performer"*

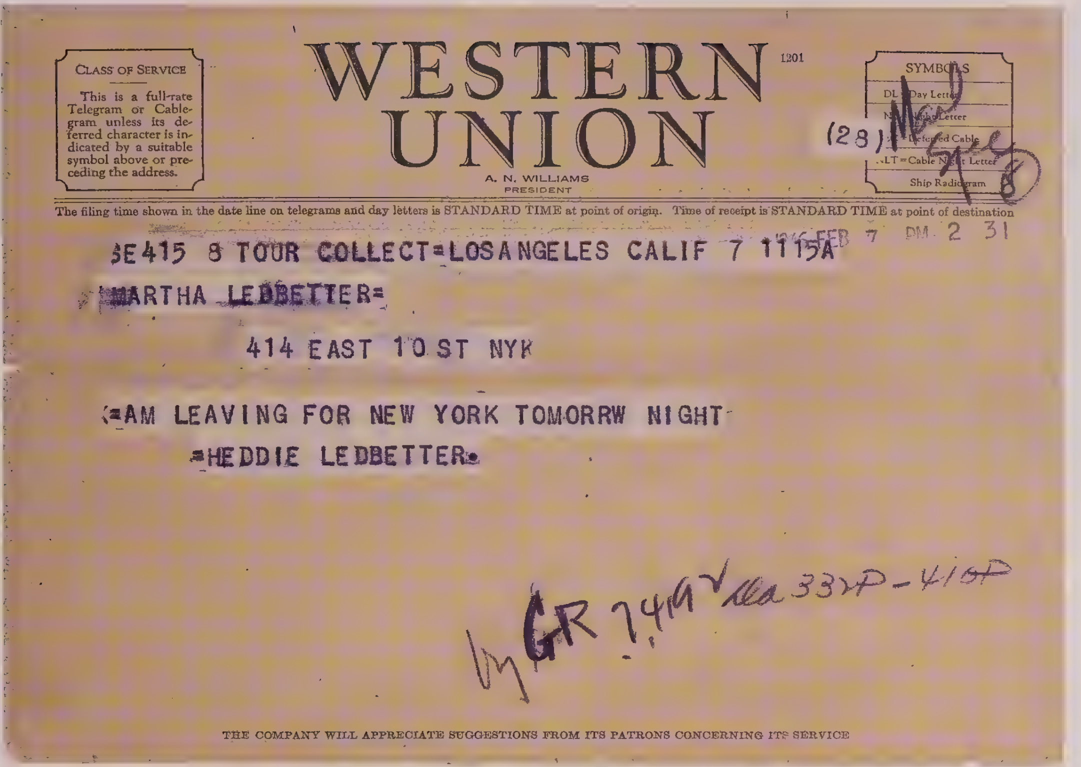
to a frilly, mascaraed Dame Fortune.
Let his honk-honk, tragedian's laughter
be edited and written in the score
to confound a routed bourgeoisie
ignoring a quaver of blues or poem,
to amaze the youth
and to amuse its youthlike maker,
seeing how this fantastic editing
returns the wild-goose originals
back to his
just helpless gasps and belly things.

**John Varney**
*(Unfinished poem written on the occasion of Lead Belly's farewell party given by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, May 5, 1944)*

"THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL"
and other SOUTHERN PRISON SONGS
SUNG BY LEAD BELLY AND THE GOLDEN GATE QUARTET
P-50
VICTOR RECORDS

LEAD BELLY'S
LAST SESSIONS
LEAD BELLY'S
LAST SESSIONS
SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS
LEAD
BELLY'S
LAST SESSIONS

Capitol
classics in jazz
TELL ME BABY
BACKWATER BLUES
Leadbelly
BELLA SPEED
ON A CHRISTMAS DAY
SWEET MARY BLUES
WESTERN PLAIN
TAKE THIS HAMMER
IRENE



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WESTERN UNION

1201

A. N. WILLIAMS
PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS
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NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

(28) Mail

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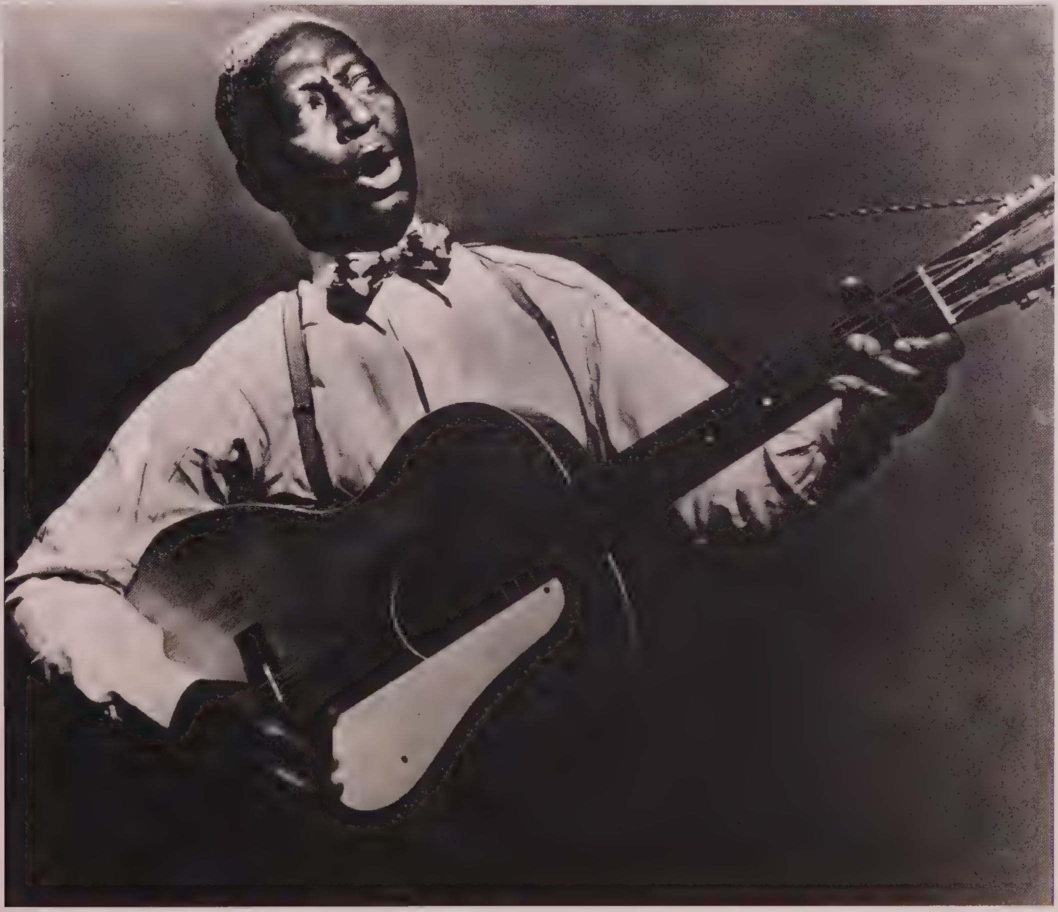
5E415 8 TOUR COLLECT=LOSANGELES CALIF 7 1115A 1946 FEB 7 PM 2 31

MARTHA LEDBETTER=
414 EAST 10 ST NYK

=AM LEAVING FOR NEW YORK TOMORRW NIGHT
=HEDDIE LEDBETTER=

by GR 7.49 ✓ rla 332P - 410P

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE



# UNDER SUSPICION

*"He did not smoke tobacco, gamble, play poker, dice, nor waste his time at idle things."*

**Tiny Robinson**

## Lead Belly Signs for The People's World, 1944

LOS ANGELES, July 6. — Lead Belly — or Huddie Ledbetter to be strictly accurate — is a grey-haired fifty-five-year-old Negro who can sing 500 of his own songs without repeating himself and is as close to being a people's artist as these United States can boast. From playing an accordion on his sharecropper father's farm when he was two-and-a-half years old, Lead Belly has progressed through singing for townspeople, governors, the Library of Congress (some 1000 records) and Café Society, until now he is in Hollywood where, appropriately enough, he will spend the summer working in films and singing at People's World's parties around Los Angeles.

Lead Belly is a folk singer who thinks, feels and reacts through song. It is literally impossible for him to talk for more than five minutes without breaking into song to express himself. He can make up lyrics and tunes at the drop of an eyebrow. Today when he came into The People's World to be interviewed, he quite naturally had a combination interview, song festival and impromptu dancing program to express what he has to say. It wasn't an act; he was just being Lead Belly.

Last week he telephoned his wife long distance on her birthday. He spent the entire three minutes singing a birthday song he had written for her. It probably didn't even occur to him to spend it talking.

He seldom sings a song that isn't his own, and he shrugs in embarrassment when somebody asks him for "Shoo, Shoo Baby." To Lead Belly a song is an expression of his own feeling and experience, sung in his own music, which draws heavily from the old boogie-woogie that he learned by hanging around the Barrel House (he pronounces it Ba'll House) in Shreveport, Louisiana.

### Self-expression

His songs come — directly and almost immediately — from his own experience. His famous "Jump down, turn around, pick a bale of cotton," for instance, stems from his long career as a cotton-picker, at which Lead Belly is by no means an amateur. He is a two-sack picker — there are few agricultural workers who are — and always used to pick, not quite a bale, but 750 pounds at least — on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, being able to top the average 250 pounds a day by skill, speed and the two sacks, which enables him to weigh in once where the average picker weighs in twice.

The rest of the days Lead Belly took it easy, playing his twelve-string guitar at all hours. He is still playing on a twelve-string guitar — which is rarer than two-sack pickers — which he picked up in Texas many years ago from a traveling carnival man after an over-enthusiastic gal had broken all six strings on his other guitar by fulsome hugging during a dance where he was playing.

Lead Belly writes and composes his songs mostly at night, lying in bed getting words to which he puts tunes. When a good thought hits him he gets up and puts it down as, for instance, he did the night after getting some Jim Crow shoving around in Washington. That night he wrote most of his memorable "Bourgeois Blues":

*Thin is the home of the brave, the land of the free*
*I don't want to be mistreated by no bourgeoisie*
*Living in a bourgeois town.*

The next day he and his wife were on the terrace of a restaurant when they heard the proprietor object to their presence. That night Lead Belly added a lyric.

*Me and my sweet wife Marthy stood up stairs*
*Heard a white man say, don't want any Negroes there*
*He was a bourgeois man*
*Living in a bourgeois town.*

### Lifetime of Song

Lead Belly has been playing his music for folks as long as he can remember. He was less than three when he learned to play the accordion, and after getting out of the seventh grade at a little country school for Negroes he played for crowds in front of stores, going from store to store at the proprietor's request, and playing all night long at the "sukey jump" dances, where the Negroes sang and danced all Saturday night until the farmer told them to milk the cows.

After that he wandered through the South with his guitar and two cotton sacks.

Lead Belly became newsworthy when he began singing for Southern governors around 1935, and after Allan Lomax, American folk song authority, picked him up. He recorded more than 1000 folk song records for the Library of Congress. Ten years of New York radio and night club work followed.

He isn't bothered by discrimination as much as he used to be, and thinks things are definitely on the upgrade for the Negro. He likes to talk about the canteen in New York where both Negroes and whites enjoy themselves together.

### People's World Song

Asked if he could make up a song about The People's World to sing at parties for the paper, Lead Belly nodded, waved his hands about, and sang too fast for typing:

*The People's World your name is called*
*The People's World your name is called*
*I said it, your name is called to outshine the sun*
*(CHORUS)*
*To outshine the sun, oh Lord, to outshine sun*
*To outshine the sun, oh Lord, to outshine sun*
*You read it, its name is called*
*You read it, its name is called to outshine the sun*
*You read it, its name is called, you read it you read it*
*You read it, its name is called*
*United Nation, its name is called*
*I tell you, its name is called, is called, to outshine the sun.*
*(CHORUS)*
*The People's World its name is called*
*The People's World its name is called to outshine the sun*
*(CHORUS)*
*To win this war its name is called*
*To win this war its name is called*
*To win this war its name is called*
*To outshine the sun.*

**Dolph Winebrenner**

FBI Record
(cond)

Elkins Island Huddie Ledbetter #69123
New York Received: May 20, 1939
One year assault 3rd degree

---

PRISON RAP SHEET

No. 19469 Baton Rouge, La. June 27, 1934
Name: Huddie Ledbetter colored
Age: 42
Received: February 26, 1930
Parish: Caddo
Crime: Assault w. i. murder
Location: "A" Angola
:min. 6 years
Term:max. 10years
:full term February 26, 1940
Expiration:commutation April 26, 1937

Punishment: November 21, 1931 10 lashes laziness
June 27, 1932 15 lashes impudence

He was placed on the Eligible List May 1, 1930 as waiter at "F" then as Tailor at Road Camp # 5 and is now free man's waiter at "A"

He served a term in Texas for murder; was pardoned

D.G.T. would have released him June 26, 1934. Fact of his pardon has just been ascertained. In the ordinary course, he will come up July 15 for consideration for discharge August 1st.

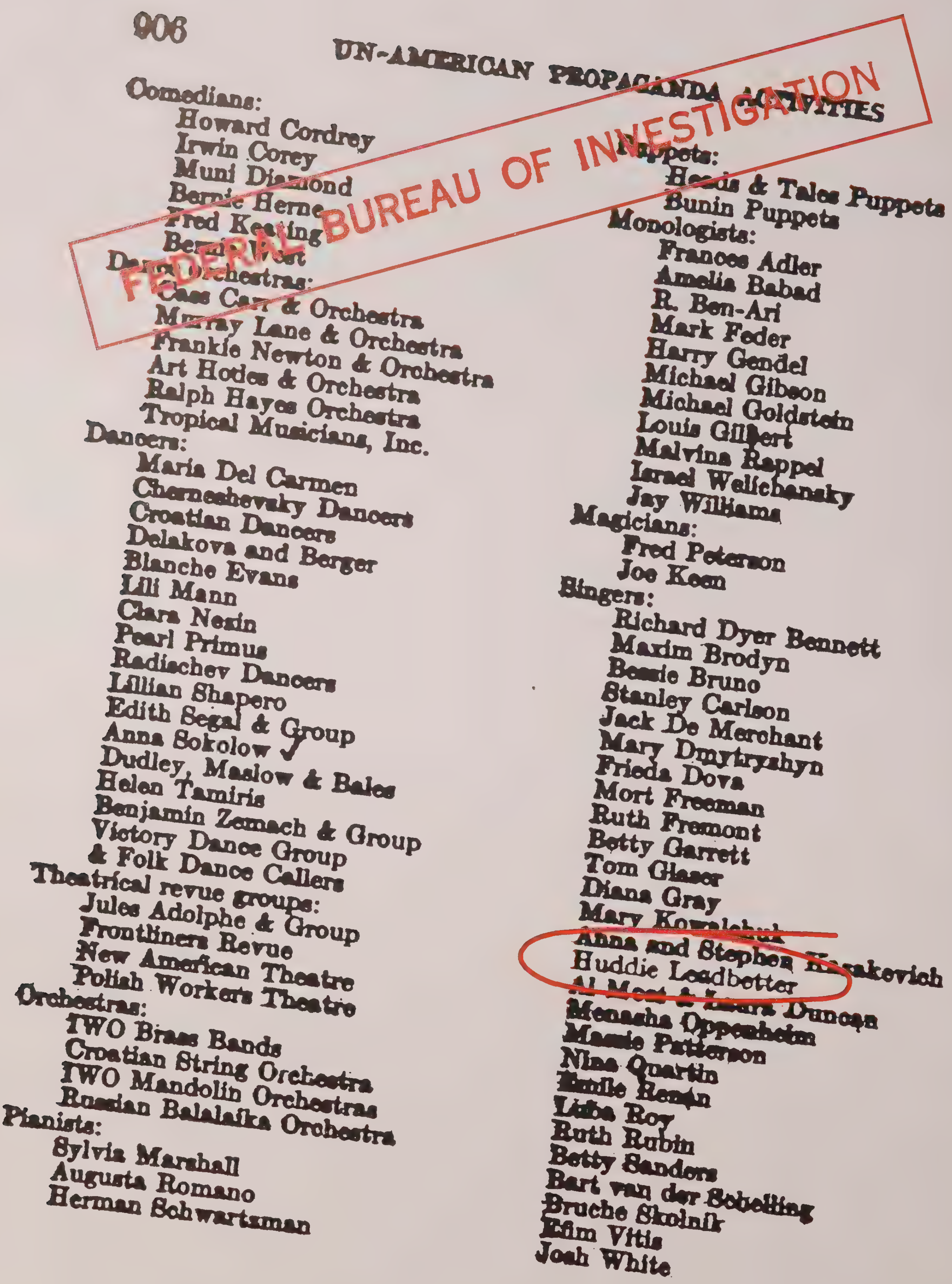
Board of Pardons June 1933 recommended commutation to 3-10 years. Governor has not acted upon this recommendation.

---

There are letters in his file between Ledbetter and R.L. Himes, General Manager of the Penitentiary. Mention is made of a poem written for the Governor, which Himes delivered. All of the letters concern Ledbetter's wanting to get out of prison. He asked Himes for a reprieve. Himes told him he was a second offender and was not eligible. Ledbetter claimed he was a first offender. Himes reminded Ledbetter of his time at Huntsville, Texas, which Ledbetter denied. Ledbetter even said that the fingerprints lied. Ledbetter, in one of his appeals to Himes, said that he has a wife and daughter to support and he has served enough time.

---

There is a letter in his file from Sheriff Hughes of Shreveport dated Sept. 26, 1934. This was almost two months after Ledbetter was released. Hughes called him Hughie Ledbetter. He wanted to know if it were true that Ledbetter had been released since he committed "assault to murder,on Mr. Dick Elliot, a splendid white citizen of Looringsport" The prison replied in the affirmative.



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  Muni Diamond
  Bernie Herne
  Fred Keating
  Bernie West
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  Murray Lane & Orchestra
  Frankie Newton & Orchestra
  Art Hodes & Orchestra
  Ralph Hayes Orchestra
  Tropical Musicians, Inc.
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  Cherneshevsky Dancers
  Croatian Dancers
  Delakova and Berger
  Blanche Evans
  Lili Mann
  Clara Nesin
  Pearl Primus
  Radischev Dancers
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  Edith Segal & Group
  Anna Sokolow ✓
  Dudley, Maslow & Bales
  Helen Tamiris
  Benjamin Zemach & Group
  Victory Dance Group
  & Folk Dance Callers
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  Frontliners Revue
  New American Theatre
  Polish Workers Theatre
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  Croatian String Orchestra
  IWO Mandolin Orchestras
  Russian Balalaika Orchestra
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  Augusta Romano
  Herman Schwartsman

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  Bunin Puppets
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  Amelia Babad
  R. Ben-Ari
  Mark Feder
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  Michael Gibson
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  Louis Gilbert
  Malvina Rappel
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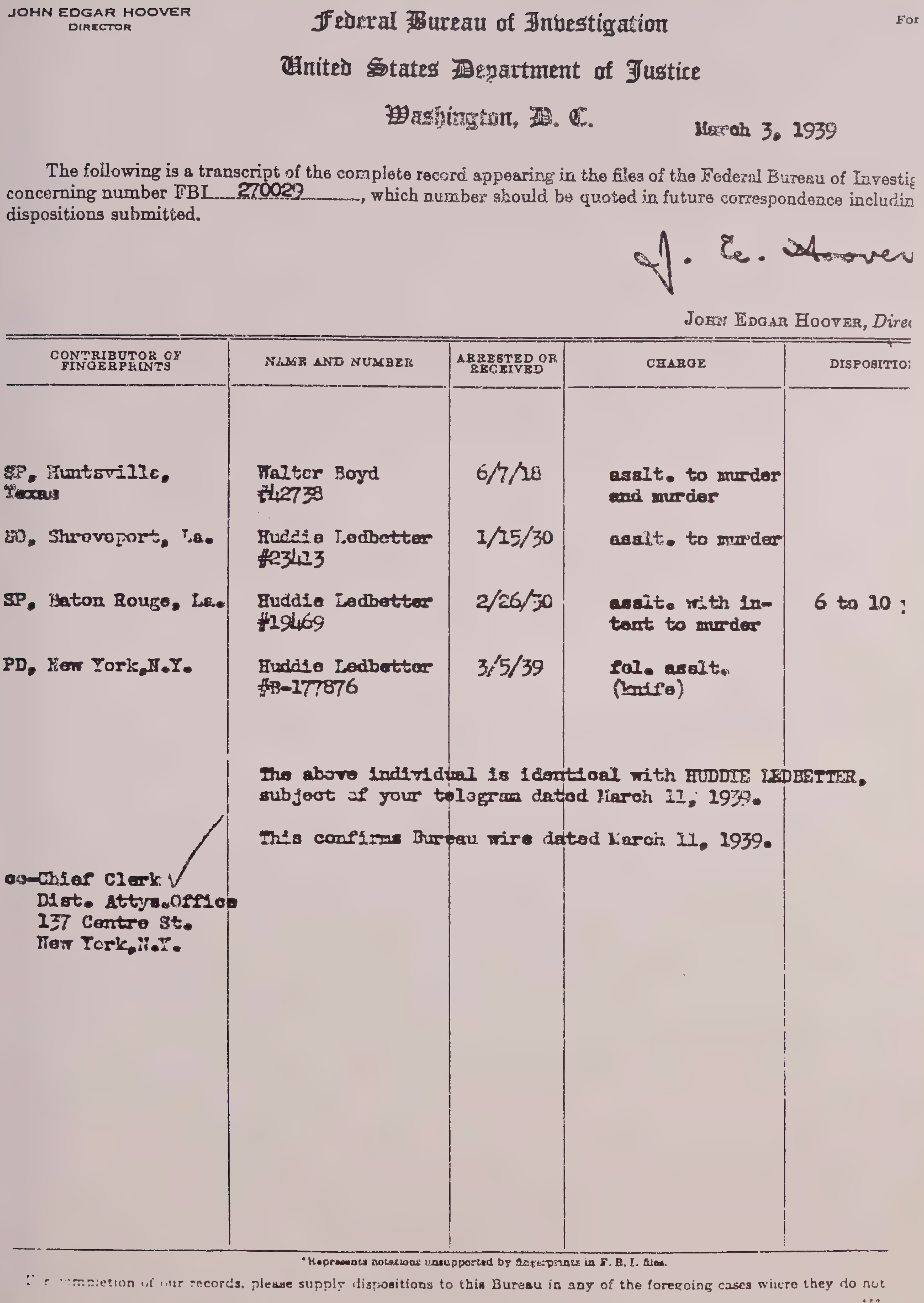
  Richard Dyer Bennett
  Maxim Brodyn
  Bessie Bruno
  Stanley Carlson
  Jack De Merchant
  Mary Dmytryshyn
  Frieda Dova
  Mort Freeman
  Ruth Fremont
  Betty Garrett
  Tom Glaser
  Diana Gray
  Mary Kowalchuk
  Anna and Stephen Kazakevich
  Huddie Leadbetter
  Al Moss & Laura Duncan
  Menasha Oppenheim
  Massie Patterson
  Nina Quartin
  Emile Renan
  Litha Roy
  Ruth Rubin
  Betty Sanders
  Bart van der Schelling
  Bruche Skolnik
  Efim Vitis
  Josh White



JOHN EDGAR HOOVER
DIRECTOR

# Federal Bureau of Investigation
## United States Department of Justice
### Washington, D. C.

For

March 3, 1939

The following is a transcript of the complete record appearing in the files of the Federal Bureau of Investig concerning number FBI 270029, which number should be quoted in future correspondence includin dispositions submitted.

J. E. Hoover

JOHN EDGAR HOOVER, *Direc*

| CONTRIBUTOR OF FINGERPRINTS | NAME AND NUMBER | ARRESTED OR RECEIVED | CHARGE | DISPOSITIO |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SP, Huntsville, Texas | Walter Boyd<br>#42738 | 6/7/18 | aslt. to murder and murder | |
| SO, Shreveport, La. | Huddie Ledbetter<br>#23413 | 1/15/30 | aslt. to murder | |
| SP, Baton Rouge, La. | Huddie Ledbetter<br>#19469 | 2/26/30 | aslt. with intent to murder | 6 to 10 |
| PD, New York, N.Y. | Huddie Ledbetter<br>#B-177876 | 3/5/39 | fel. aslt. (knife) | |

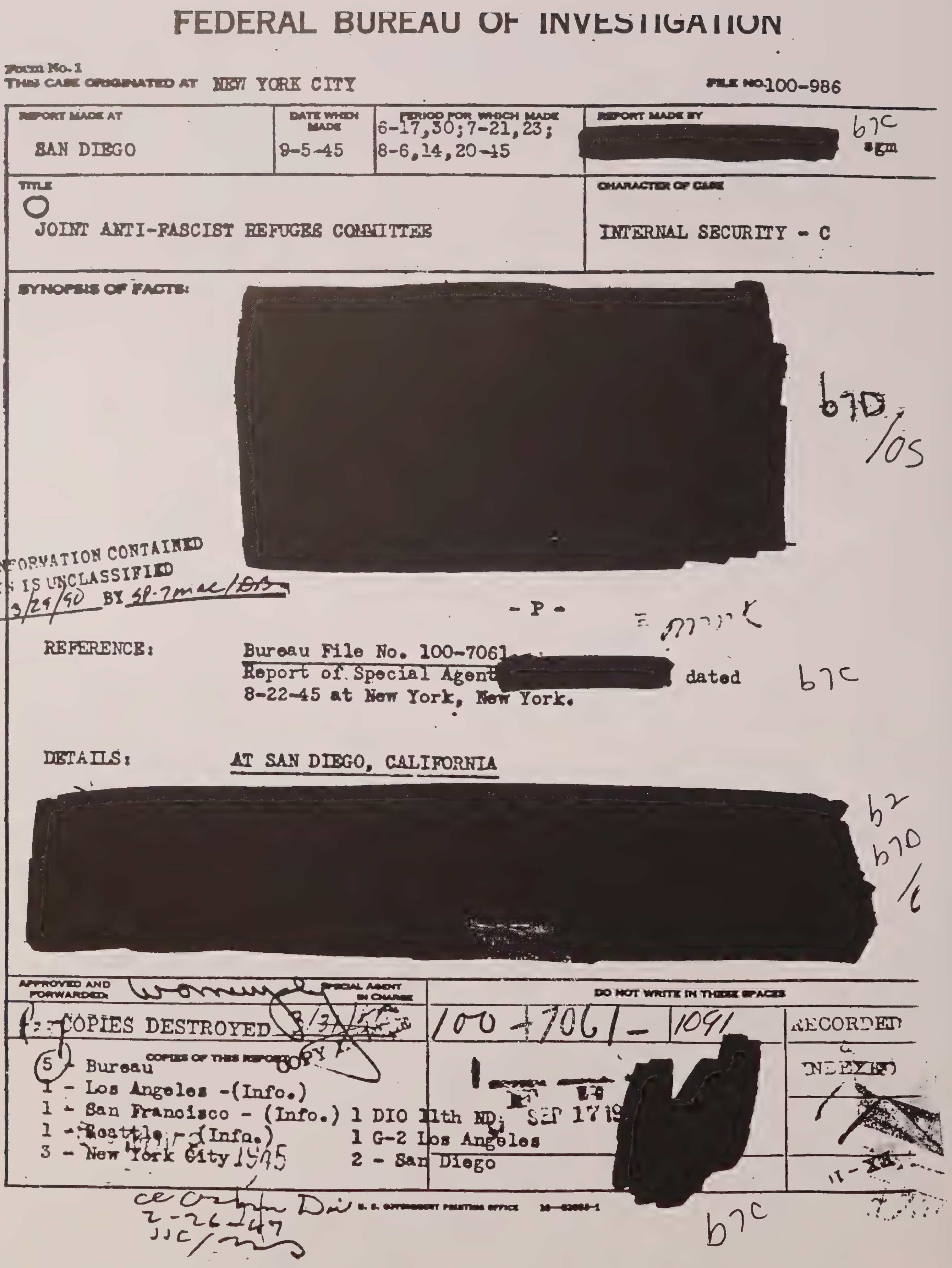
The above individual is identical with HUDDIE LEDBETTER, subject of your telegram dated March 11, 1939.

This confirms Bureau wire dated March 11, 1939.

cc-Chief Clerk ✓
Dist. Attys. Office
137 Centre St.
New York, N.Y.

*Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints in F. B. I. files.

[illegible] completion of our records, please supply dispositions to this Bureau in any of the foregoing cases where they do not



# FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Form No. 1
THIS CASE ORIGINATED AT NEW YORK CITY

FILE NO. 100-986

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| REPORT MADE AT<br>SAN DIEGO | DATE WHEN MADE<br>9-5-45 | PERIOD FOR WHICH MADE<br>6-17,30;7-21,23;<br>8-6,14,20-45 | REPORT MADE BY<br>[redacted] b7C<br>sgm |
| TITLE<br>JOINT ANTI-FASCIST REFUGEE COMMITTEE | | | CHARACTER OF CASE<br>INTERNAL SECURITY - C |

SYNOPSIS OF FACTS: [redacted]

b7D /05

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 3/29/90 BY SP-7mac/DB

- P -

REFERENCE: Bureau File No. 100-7061
Report of Special Agent [redacted] dated
8-22-45 at New York, New York.

b7C

DETAILS: AT SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

[redacted]

b2
b7D
/c

APPROVED AND FORWARDED: SPECIAL AGENT IN CHARGE

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100-7061-1091

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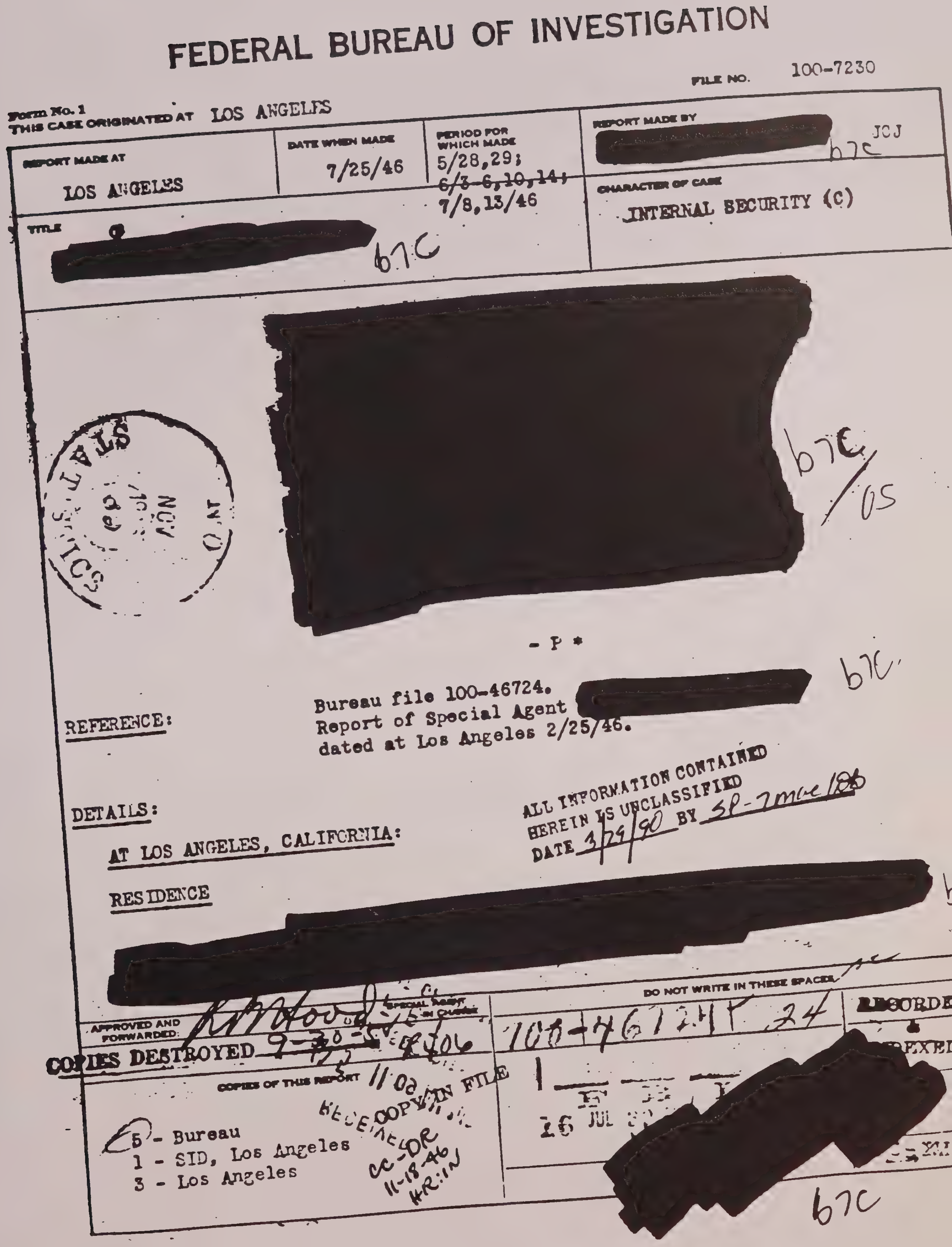

# FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

FILE NO. 100-7230

Form No. 1
THIS CASE ORIGINATED AT LOS ANGELES

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| REPORT MADE AT<br>LOS ANGELES | DATE WHEN MADE<br>7/25/46 | PERIOD FOR WHICH MADE<br>5/28,29;<br>~~6/3-6,10,14;~~<br>7/8,13/46 | REPORT MADE BY<br>[redacted] JCJ b7c |
| TITLE<br>[redacted] b7c | | | CHARACTER OF CASE<br>INTERNAL SECURITY (C) |

[redacted]

b7c/05

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b7c

**REFERENCE:** Bureau file 100-46724. Report of Special Agent [redacted] dated at Los Angeles 2/25/46.

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 3/29/90 BY SP-7mac 186

**DETAILS:**

**AT LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA:**

**RESIDENCE**

[redacted]

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16 JUL

[redacted]

b7c

# UNKA HUDDIE

*"They were playing that 50's crap on the radio," Janis said. "It seemed so shallow, all oop-boop. It had nothing. Then I heard Lead Belly — and it was like a flash. It mattered to me."*

**Janis Joplin**

As a small boy every morning when I got up, the first thing I would do is crawl upstairs because we lived in an apartment on the east side of New York. I would go up one flight to visit Unka Huddie, mainly because he was so cheerful, and everybody else would be going to work and he would be around and available. Not having a brother or sister at that particular time to play with, he was my best playmate.

There were other children in the building, including Bobby who lived next door to him. The two of us would always stand outside and listen to him practicing on the guitar and we probably heard many, many songs that never were recorded. Many were spontaneous songs were based on what we were doing at that particular time. Sometimes Bobby and I would get in a fight on the landing and he would come out and sing to us to soothe the furious nature of two little kids. It always seemed to make peace.

Many times it was a lesson taught and looking back over the years, it's almost ironic that a man that had such a violent past could sing of peaceful moments to two children. Somehow his singing always went over well with children and they always listened attentively. Sometimes he would tell us stories and sometimes he would sing about a particular issue that we were arguing about like a bicycle or a ball or some toy.

It seems that he was always creative enough to make up a song on the spot concerning what we were doing. I never knew if they were already made up songs or if he was making them up at that particular moment. That will always be a mystery.

After a full day of play and listening to him, the end of the day was always spent in some time dedicated just for me to insure that I was given my bath and was sung off to sleep. Selfishly I would always ask for a different song even though there were some that were his particular favorites. Mostly I wanted to hear a new one because every one that he sang was almost mystical and so farfetched that it was just unbelievable. There were stories on where he had gone and wanted to go, and places where I would want to go, too, someday. I don't think he ever worked at those places or visited them but somehow he had a feeling and imagination for them. Somehow, the songs he sang and the stories he told convinced me that he had already been there. At that time (they were exactly before dreaming) I wanted to hear the good things. When you play as hard as I did as a child, you went to bed early and you woke up early. Not knowing that all the adults probably stayed up late, I was the official alarm clock. When I did go up the stairs to visit Unka Huddie. Come to think of it, we never locked our doors, even in New York City. Then again, this was a long time ago.

Through the door I'd go, wake up Aunt Martha and jump on Unka Huddie and ask him to sing me a wake-up song. I'd be fully awake; he would still be sleepy but I would want that song and, like the man he was, he put the greatest effort into it. It was as if he were singing at Carnegie Hall and boy did I feel privileged! He would be at his best, and as good as the song was I'd want more. It seems like I had a way of pulling his best out of him. I wonder if he played as well as he played for me when he was playing in front of an audience. I'm quite sure he played his best for me. He was well rested and under no pressure. Did he ever make me proud!

Like many New York City apartments in those days that didn't have air conditioning, the windows and doors were left open to create a draft. There were other children in the building who got up early just like I did, and their routine would be to come running into Unka Huddie's apartment. We all sat around to listen. He had his audience. Every once in a while we'd offer him some of our lollipops and that was giving up a lot when you're a kid. Then as soon as the entertainment was over we'd all run off to play.

There would always be someone coming by Unka Huddie's apartment to make music or to hear him play or take pictures. I never knew who any of these people were. They didn't live in the building but some I would see over and over again. Later I found out they were Burl Ives, Josh White, Rev. Gary Davis, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Pete Seeger and others. I never did know when he rested because I know they stayed up late at night, playing the guitars and just having a good time. Then there was the early morning wake-up crew — me and my friend — so I imagine he got very little rest.

His guitar was funny looking. It had more strings than anyone else's. I thought it was because when he would break a string, he would have one left there to replace it. Everybody else would have to go change theirs. I thought he had the best idea to put a spare on it from the beginning. I thought my reserved seat was always the one in his arms. I don't know why the guitar was there because it was taking up space but somehow he managed to put me on his lap and play the guitar at the same time.

Time went by fast, although for me it was going by slow. Then all of a sudden I saw a great deal of change occur in him and it made me somewhat sad but I didn't understand why. He had always worn a white starched shirt and tie. I always thought he was ready to go somewhere. The only thing I can remember was that this big man was no longer as strong as he used to be. I mean he was big like everybody else but yet he was weak and after a while he couldn't play the guitar as much as he used to. How could he hold me and the guitar at the same time? It was either one or the other. But I couldn't understand. He was older than me, he was bigger than me, why couldn't he perform these physical feats? Aunt Martha looked well and she could move around; but he couldn't and that always bothered me. He told me he was not feeling well, that he was tired, that he was ill. But you are supposed to get over your illness; how long does a cold last?

Sad days really came when it became very difficult for him to even strum the guitar or when he could not play it at all. He would just set it in his arms because that was how I wanted to remember. I didn't want to remember him in a wheelchair or on the couch with a blanket across him, head slumped, shoulders bent over, having difficulty in drinking out of a glass. That was not what I wanted to remember. I wanted to remember the good old days, plus I didn't want my friends to see my big old uncle so weak.

I wish I could have propped him up and given him some vitamins. Things really got bad when he was no longer even sitting in the chair and everybody else began to look sad as well. I wanted to run in there and wake him up. He wasn't playing for me anymore.

Unfortunately, that final day came and he wasn't with me anymore. But now as an adult I listen to his music and his songs to help bring back all those magical moments. As a physician today, I have a better understanding of his deteriorating condition, and his subsequent behavior. I've learned to see the man happy and joyful from watching old film clips, reading books and articles, listening to his recordings and attending memorial concerts.

Everyone seems to have some photograph or story that is being gathered together, especially things that happened before I was born. These will replenish and make fuller the memories that I have. And as others share their memories we will all hear the music of Lead Belly again, and in ways not heard before.

**Alvin Singh, MD,** *the grand nephew of Lead Belly, lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.*

*Martha Ledbetter with Alvin Singh, 1955, photo by John Reynolds*

*photos by Richard S, Blacher, MD*

## Martha: Vigil

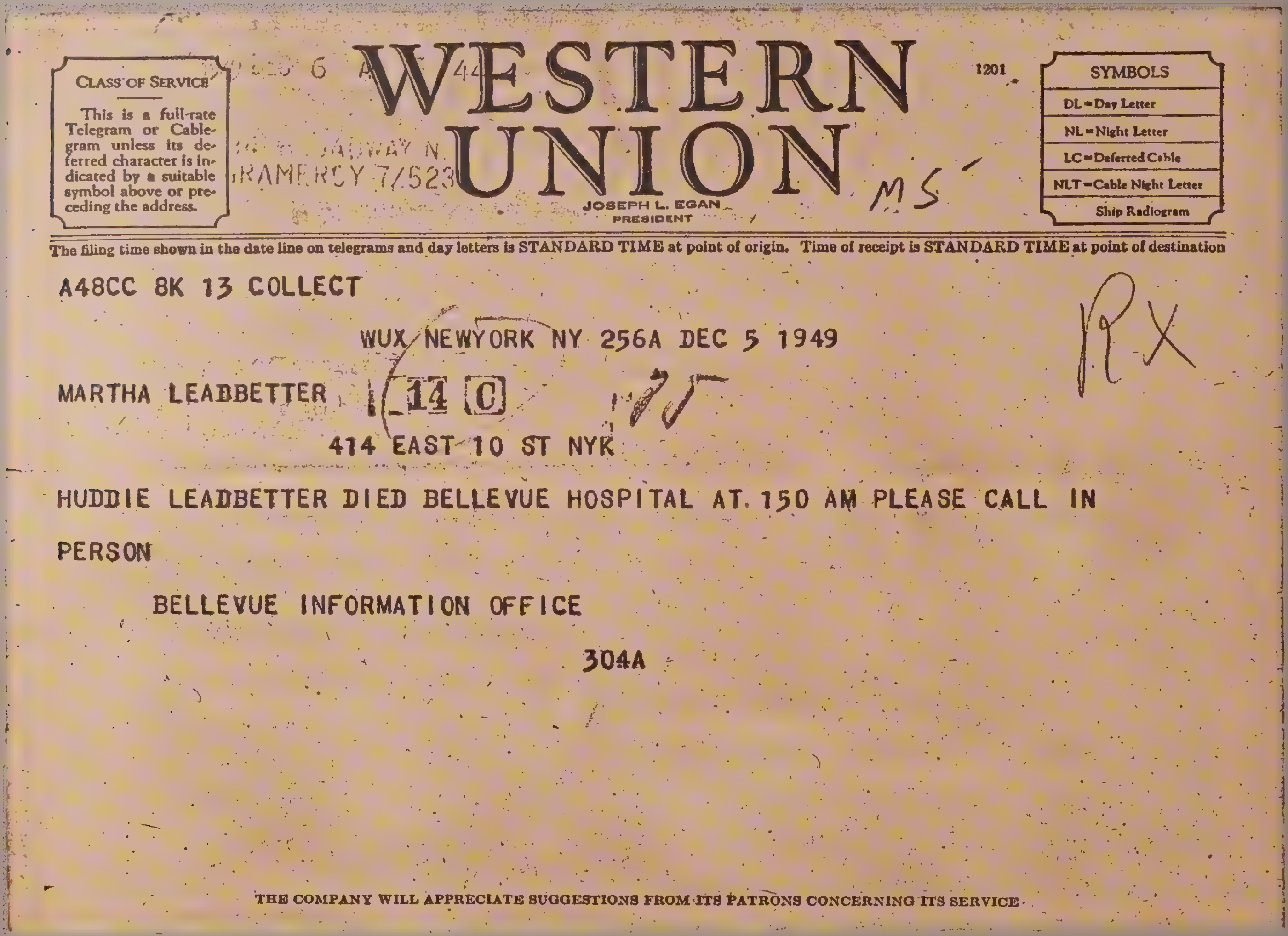
‘til fever’s run cold, ‘til the last breath’s gone
i’ll stand here wiping down his brow.
a few more hours till we see the dawn
together. such a small, bright thing. right now

it’s the one gift we got left. no more high
songs or low blues. them hands can’t hold guitar,
keep a beat. that red river voice ‘bout dried
to its rocky bed. my lead: *look how far*

*we been, baby. ook how far we come.* yes,
it’s been some travelin’. sometimes crooked
backroads, sometimes straight ahead.
this one last morning, lord, than i’m alone—

on my way home to do what widows do:
i’ll unload the trunk, air out the best suit.

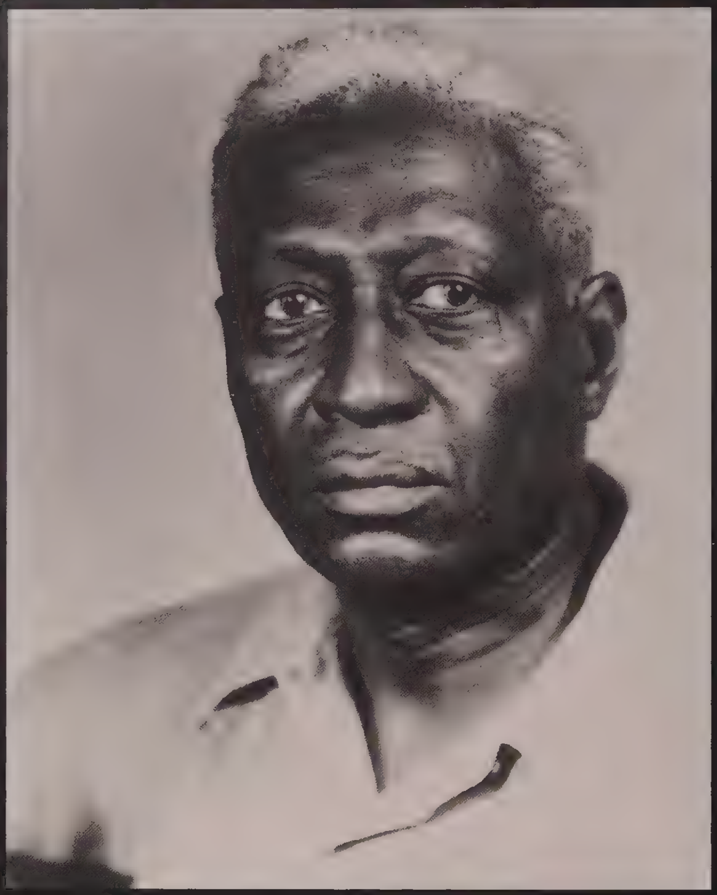
**Tyehimba Jess**



# GOING HOME

*"The artist in Lead Belly was a hungry man, hungry to see himself in the best of clothes, on the best street, in the best car, the best world. He knew he could help his folks everywhere to keep up their fight and their faith."*

**Pete Seeger**

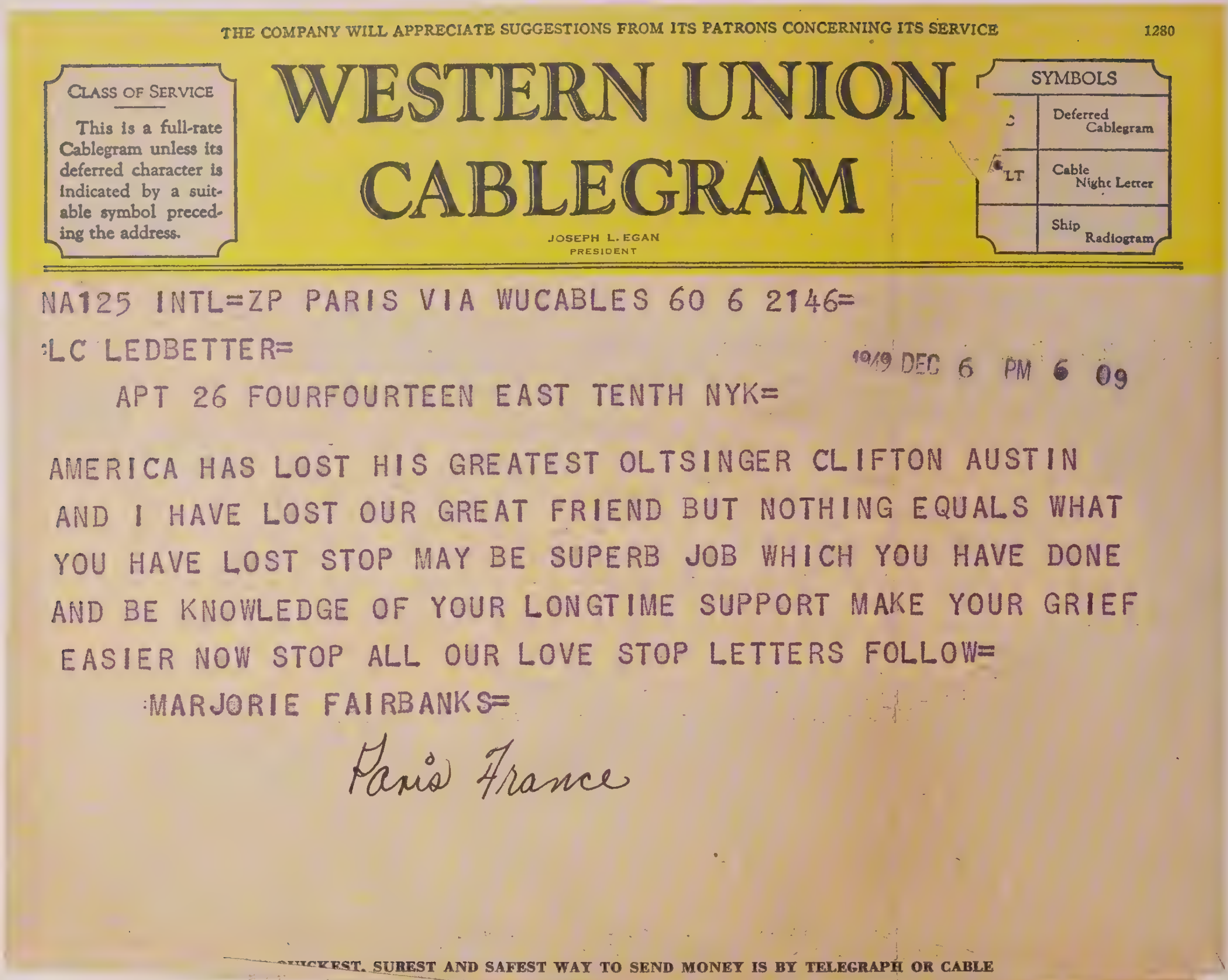


## Deadbelly

Old Man Mose
Early American Jazz pianist
Had a grandson
Called Deadbelly.
Old Man Mose walloped
        the rollickin keyport
        Wahoo wildhouse Piany
        with monkies in his hair
        drooling spagetti, beer
        and beans, with a cigar
        mashed in his countenance
        of gleaming happiness
        the furtive madman
        of old sane times.

Deadbelly dont hide it —
        Lead killed Leadbelly —
Deadbelly admit
        Deadbelly modern cat
Cool — Deadbelly, Man,
Craziest.
        Old Man Mose is Dead
        But Deadbelly get Ahead
            Ha ha ha

**Mexico City Blues by Jack Kerouac**
**Grove Press, NYC, 1959**



THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE 1280

CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a full-rate Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol preceding the address.

# WESTERN UNION CABLEGRAM

JOSEPH L. EGAN
PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS

| | |
|---|---|
| C | Deferred Cablegram |
| LT | Cable Night Letter |
| | Ship Radiogram |

NA125 INTL=ZP PARIS VIA WUCABLES 60 6 2146=

:LC LEDBETTER=

1949 DEC 6 PM 6 09

APT 26 FOURFOURTEEN EAST TENTH NYK=

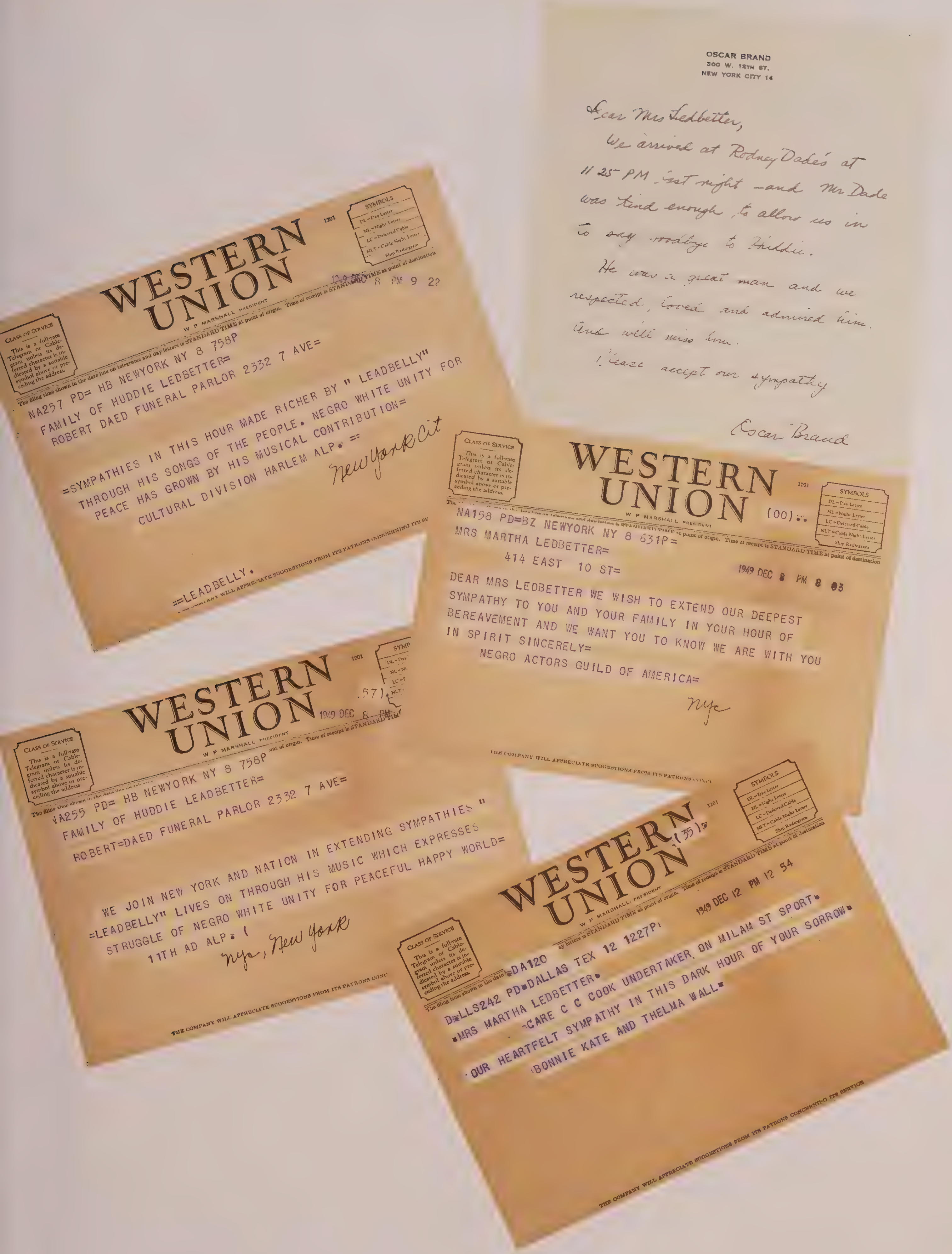
AMERICA HAS LOST HIS GREATEST OLTSINGER CLIFTON AUSTIN AND I HAVE LOST OUR GREAT FRIEND BUT NOTHING EQUALS WHAT YOU HAVE LOST STOP MAY BE SUPERB JOB WHICH YOU HAVE DONE AND BE KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR LONGTIME SUPPORT MAKE YOUR GRIEF EASIER NOW STOP ALL OUR LOVE STOP LETTERS FOLLOW=

:MARJORIE FAIRBANKS=

Paris France

ICKEST. SUREST AND SAFEST WAY TO SEND MONEY IS BY TELEGRAPH OR CABLE

WESTERN UNION
TELEGRAM



OSCAR BRAND
300 W. 12TH ST.
NEW YORK CITY 14

Dear Mrs Ledbetter,

We arrived at Rodney Dade's at 11 25 PM last night — and Mr Dade was kind enough, to allow us in to say goodbye to Huddie.

He was a great man and we respected, loved and admired him. And will miss him.

Please accept our sympathy

Oscar Brand

---

WESTERN UNION

W P MARSHALL PRESIDENT

1201

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This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

SYMBOLS
DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

DEC 8 PM 9 22

NA257 PD= HB NEWYORK NY 8 758P
FAMILY OF HUDDIE LEDBETTER=
ROBERT DAED FUNERAL PARLOR 2332 7 AVE=

=SYMPATHIES IN THIS HOUR MADE RICHER BY " LEADBELLY" THROUGH HIS SONGS OF THE PEOPLE. NEGRO WHITE UNITY FOR PEACE HAS GROWN BY HIS MUSICAL CONTRIBUTION=
CULTURAL DIVISION HARLEM ALP. ==

New York Cit

==LEADBELLY.

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SE

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WESTERN UNION

W P MARSHALL PRESIDENT

1201

(00)

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DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

NA158 PD=BZ NEWYORK NY 8 631P=
MRS MARTHA LEDBETTER=
414 EAST 10 ST=

1949 DEC 8 PM 8 03

DEAR MRS LEDBETTER WE WISH TO EXTEND OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHY TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY IN YOUR HOUR OF BEREAVEMENT AND WE WANT YOU TO KNOW WE ARE WITH YOU IN SPIRIT SINCERELY=
NEGRO ACTORS GUILD OF AMERICA=

nyc

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONC

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WESTERN UNION

W P MARSHALL PRESIDENT

1201

.57)

1949 DEC 8 PM

CLASS OF SERVICE
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

NA255 PD= HB NEWYORK NY 8 758P
FAMILY OF HUDDIE LEADBETTER=
ROBERT=DAED FUNERAL PARLOR 2332 7 AVE=

WE JOIN NEW YORK AND NATION IN EXTENDING SYMPATHIES "=LEADBELLY" LIVES ON THROUGH HIS MUSIC WHICH EXPRESSES STRUGGLE OF NEGRO WHITE UNITY FOR PEACEFUL HAPPY WORLD=
11TH AD ALP. (

nyc, New York

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONC

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WESTERN UNION

W P MARSHALL PRESIDENT

1201

(35)

CLASS OF SERVICE
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

SYMBOLS
DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

1949 DEC 12 PM 12 54

D=LLS242 PD=DALLAS TEX 12 1227P=DA120
=MRS MARTHA LEDBETTER=
-CARE C C COOK UNDERTAKER ON MILAM ST SPORT=
OUR HEARTFELT SYMPATHY IN THIS DARK HOUR OF YOUR SORROW=
BONNIE KATE AND THELMA WALL=

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

# ‘Lead Belly,’ Who Won International Fame As Interpreter of Negro Folk Songs, Is Dead

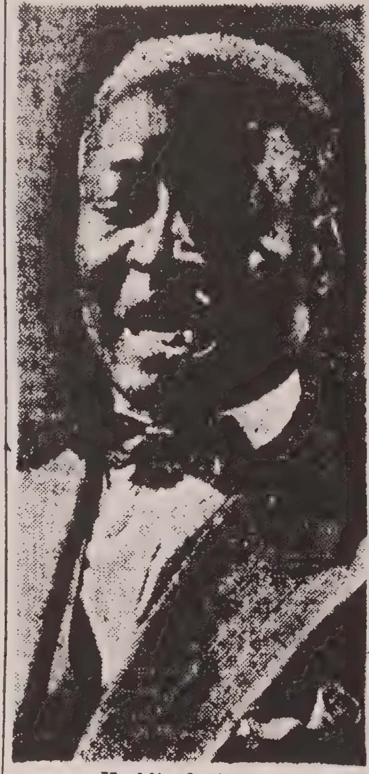
Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), the Negro minstrel from the deep South who attained international fame as an interpreter of his people's folk songs, died of a bone infection yesterday in Bellevue Hospital. He was 60 years old.

For fifteen years Lead Belly strummed his guitar and sang Negro spirituals, work songs and ballads to audiences in night clubs and concert halls. Some were his own compossitions and others anonymous works indigenous to his race. He was acclaimed by critics and untutored music lovers, a tribute to the universality of his art.

His origins were humble and his later years marked by sporadic violence. Lead Belly was born in the bayous of Louisiana, but he left the swamplands early and became a wanderer through the South. He worked as a cotton picker and laborer, learned to play the guitar and became an expert singer of the songs he heard in his travels.

John A. Lomax, an authority on American folk songs, heard Huddie Ledbetter sing in 1933, when the minstrel was serving a sentence in the Louisiana State Prison. He was instrumental in obtaining Lead Belly's pardon and brought him to New York, where he won immediate renown.

The singer found it difficult to shed the habit of quick anger he had acquired during his years as a roustabout. In 1939 he was sentenced to serve a year in a New York State prison for stabbing another man. He resumed his musical career upon his release.


Huddie Ledbetter

He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Martha Ledbetter of 414 East Tenth Street; a daughter, A. Mae Richardson of Kansas City, Mo., a sister and two nieces.

---

# "Leadbelly", Singer, Dies

---

## ‘Lead Belly,’ Who Won International Fame As Interpreter of Negro Folk Songs, Is Dead

---

## Leadbelly Dies; Sang Of 'Things I've Seen'

---

# Folk Artist Was Famous Singer, Guitarist

"Leadbelly" was buried in Shreveport, La., today, not far from the farm where he was born 60 years ago. Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter died Tuesday in Bellevue Hospital, of amyatrophic lateral sclerosis, the same disease which killed Lou Gehrig.

From Leadbelly's life as a cotton picker, a cowboy, a lumberjack, an oil field worker and many other jobs, came his songs like "John Henry," "Irene", "Bourgeois Town" and "Pick a Bale of Cotton."

His story of imprisonment, for killing a man and stabbing another, is told in a collection "Negro Folk Songs as sung by Leadbelly" by John A. and Alan Lomax, authorities on American folk music.

Called the King of the "Twelve String Guitar," Leadbelly traveled a great deal throughout the country, and during his Paris concert tour last summer he felt his right hand becoming paralyzed. On his return he spent six weeks in Bellevue and returned again two weeks ago.

Funeral services were held at Rodney Dade Funeral Home Thursday night. He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Martha Ledbetter, a daughter, A. Mae Richardson and a sister and two nieces.

HUDDIE LEDBETTER

---

# 'Leadbel —Ballad

---

# Leadbelly Made It From Prison To Nation's Top Folk Singer

By Wm. D. LAFFLER

NEW YORK — (UPI) — Huddie Ledbetter was in trouble almost all of his life.

He was a drunkard, a murderer and a troublemaker, but Ledbetter was not all bad. And when two generous white men gave him a helping hand, Huddie never got into real trouble again and died of a heart attack in his late 60's.

Ledbetter played a guitar and knew how to adapt folk music, whether it was a traditional piece such as "Rock Island Line" or a holler song.

His best composition was "Goodnight, Irene" and nobody could sing it like this man. Of course this man was the folk song immortal, Leadbelly.

Leadbelly was serving time in a Louisiana pen shortly after the death of Huey P. Long when Johnny Lomax and his son, Alan, now one of the greatest of all folklorists, came into his life.

The elder Lomax had been recording prison songs for the Library of Congress and was impressed by Leadbelly's singing.

With the help of Leadbelly, the Lomaxes got him a pardon and took him with them to other prisons and later to Harvard, where John Lomax lectured.

In 1944, five years before his death, Leadbelly cut 12 songs for Capitol. "Leadbelly" (Capitol T 1821) includes "Goodnight, Irene" and 11 arrangements of great folk songs, among them "Eagle Rock Rag" and "Backwater Blues."

---

# Leadbell ‘Irene’ Po

### With His 12-Stri and Homespu He Toured the

---

# And so 'Lea strummed his

*How often has an ex-convict jazz singer had a me concert held in his honour in New York's Carnegie America's shrine of classical music?*

*That's what they're going to do for Huddie Ledbette of the great artists of jazz; at midnight on January 2*

*Huddie died last month in New York, aged sixty-four hundred and fifty people, white and coloured, friends tives and admirers, crowded a tiny undertaker's parl Harlem for his funeral just before Christmas. Folk Josh White sang Huddie's favourite spiritual—"He said a mumbling word." Then they took his body back to the South, to Shreveport, Louisiana. But he wo forgotten.*

*Here* LAURIE HENSHAW *writes about Huddie's co life:*

## Back Home' ad at 64

### die 'Lead Belly' etter, Dies At 60

Y YORK (ANP) — Huddie Belly" Ledbetter, 60-year- ternationally famous inter- of Negro folk songs and of 'the "12-string guitar," a bone infection in Belle- spital here last week. For rs, Lead Belly had strumm- guitar and sang Negro spi- work songs and ballads diences in night clubs and t halls.

in the bayous of Louisi- left the swamplands at an age to become a wanderer. arned to play the guitar ecame an expert singer. In Lead Belly's artistry was by John A. Lomax, an au- on American folk songs, the artist was serving a term in Louisana.

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his release, he resumed reer and continued it until ame ill a year ago.

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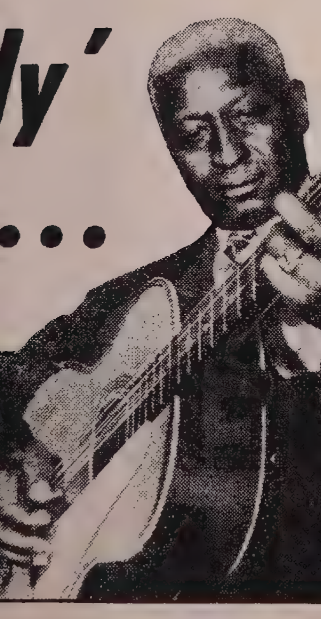

HUDDIE LEDBETTER

---

## H. Leadbetter, Folk Singer

Funeral arrangements for Huddie Ledbetter, 60, former Louisiana farmhand who achieved fame as "Leadbelly," internationally known singer of blues and work songs, were to be completed today.

**The Negro singer died yesterday in Bellevue Hospital. He had been ill for a year with a bone infection, but only last July completed a concert tour of the South. His home was at 414 E. 10th st.**

Known as "King of the 12-string guitar," an instrument not now in general use, Mr. Ledbetter was born in Mooringsport, La. He spent his early childhood as a farm hand and laborer, and during that time got the nickname of "Leadbelly," which stuck throughout his later musical career.

Surviving Mr. Ledbetter are his wife, Martha; a daughter, Arthur Mae Richardson, of Kansas City, and a sister, Australia Carr of Dallas.

---

HARD LUCK ALL HIS LIFE:

## Bone Infection Fatal to Huddie Ledbetter, 64

NEW YORK (NNPA)—Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly, who called himself "king of de twelve-string guitar players of de world" and whose homespun ballads freed him from prison terms and won him a unique place in music, died Tuesday, Dec. 6, in Bellevue Hospital of a bone infection.

Leadbelly, 64, had been ailing for a year. The infection forced him to be hospitalized last July, when he completed a concert tour of the South. On that tour and a preceding one through Europe, the disease hampered his fingering of the guitar.

### Memorial Concert Set

When his death became known, Alan Lomax, collector of American folk music and one-time sponsor, revealed that he, Josh White and other students and singers of American ballads are planning a Leadbelly concert next month.

Born in Mooringsport,, La., the son of a small farmer, Leadbelly was, by his own admission, a rowdy with a liking for liquor at the age of 15. He was imprisoned in Texas for life on his conviction of murder at the age of 33.

### Pardoned by Neff

Six years later he won a pardon from Governor Pat Neff. According to Leadbelly, Governor Neff had heard him sing and said he was going to give him a pardon, but was going to keep him in prison to sing for him when he visited the institution until his term of office expired.

Leadbelly composed a ballad, the "Freedom Song," which became the highlight of later recitals. It ended on the following refrain:

"If I had you, Governor Neff,
like you got me,
I would wake up in the mornin'
and set you free."

The Governor pardoned Leadbelly, but in 1930, Leadbelly was sentenced to 10 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for slashing six men in a knife fight.

It was then, in 1934, that Mr. Lomax and his father, the late John A. Lomax, first heard his unique improvisations and halftones accompanied by the thrumming guitar.

### Recorded in Prison

They were touring the country making recordings of folk songs, and they obtained more than 100 from Leadbelly while he was still in prison. They applied to the Governor, and once again Leadbelly was pardoned.. This time he came to New York with the Lomaxes.

From the first, Leadbelly's large repertoire—constantly augmented with ballads improvised for the occasion— was a hit with critics and public.

He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Martha Ledbetter of 414 East 10th St.; a daughter, Mrs. A. Mae Richardson of Kansas City, Mo., a sister and two nieces.

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## LEDBETTER, NOTED NEGRO FOLK SINGER, DIES AT 60

Huddy (Leadbelly) Ledbetter, 60, noted Negro folksinger, died yesterday, 1:50 a.m., at Bellevue Hospital of amytropic lateral sclerosis, the disease which killed Lou Gehrig.

Ledbetter, who was known as "king of the 12-string guitar, was discovered 15 years ago in the South by John Lomax, the folk song collector. Then followed a distinguished career of folk singing during which many of his songs, like Irene, Midnight Special, etc., became familiar to audiences all over the country.

His voice became prominent in people's struggles and movements from coast to coast; he was a member of People's Songs and People's Artists. The latter organization and many prominent citizens were planning a testimonial to him at the time of his death.

Ledbetter is survived by his wife, Martha Promise Ledbetter of New York, and his daughter, A. Mao Richardson of Kansas City Mo. Funeral arrangements will be announced later.

---

### HUDDIE LEDBETTER

Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly, ballad singer and guitarist, died recently in Bellevue Hospital of a bone infection. He was about 64 years old. He had been ailing for a year, but did not yield to his illness until last July, when he had completed a tour of Europe and of the South. Alan Lomax, collector of American folk music and Leadbelly's onetime sponsor, said that he, Josh White, and other students and singers of American ballads would give a Leadbelly memorial concert in New York.

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### HUDDIE(Leadbelly)LEDBETTER

***Famed ballad singer***

Huddie Ledbetter, 60, who rose from Louisana farm hand to become internationally acclaimed as Leadbelly, singer of oldtime work songs and ballads, died yesterday in Bellevue. He had been ill of a bone infection for a year.

Born in Mooringsport, La., Ledbetter, a Negro, spent the early part of his life as a farm worker and laborer. His career was launched by the late John Lomax, collector of folk lore, who heard him sing on a Texas farm.

Ledbetter is survived by his wife, Martha, of 414 E. Tenth St., a daughter, a sister, and two nieces.

---

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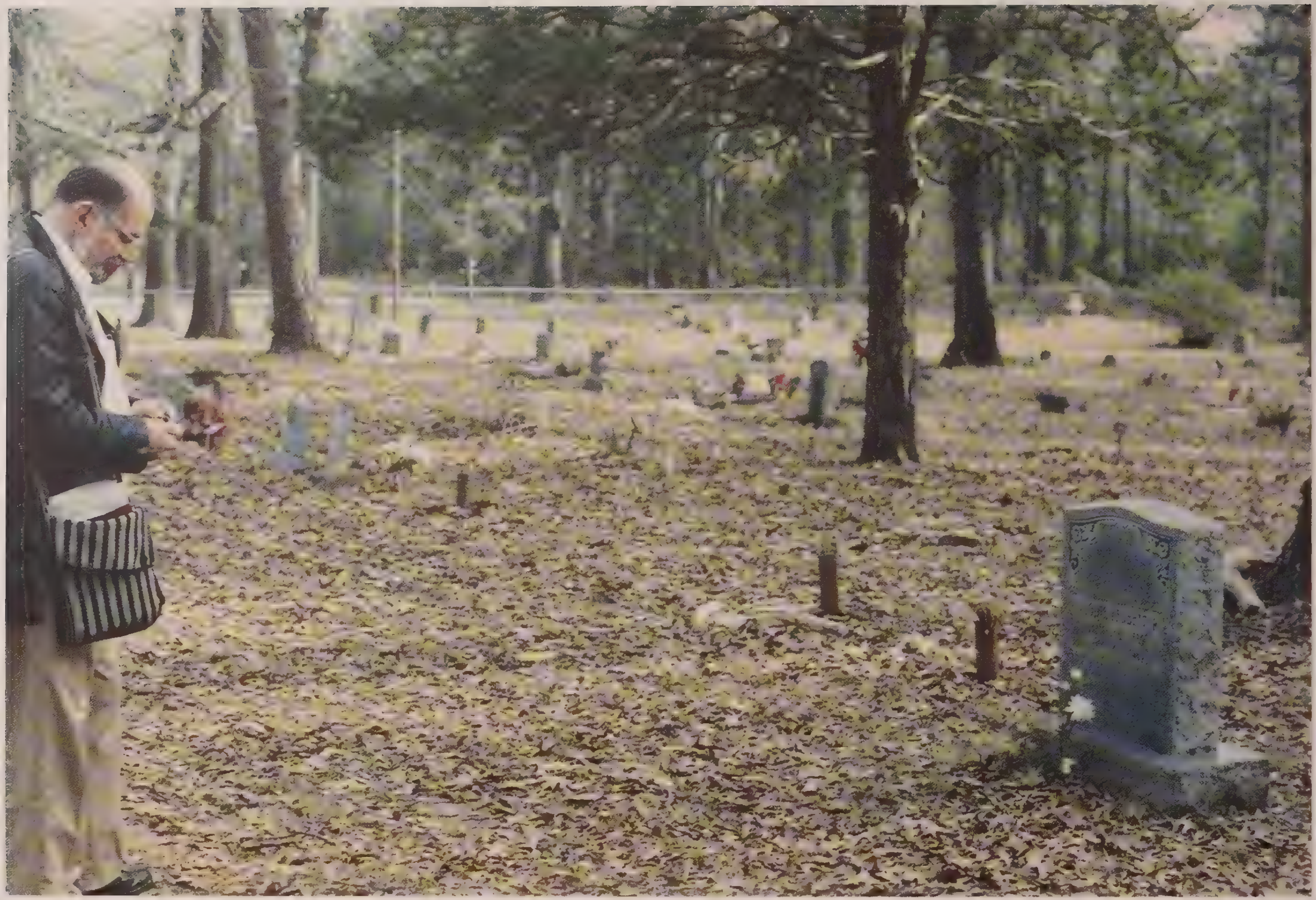
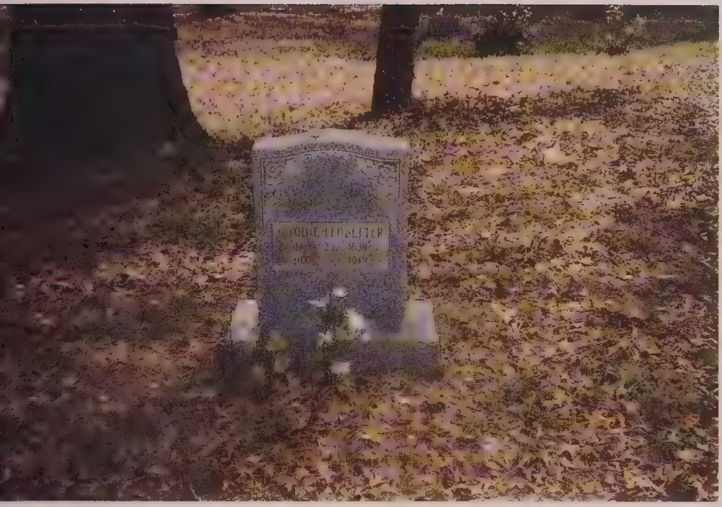
**Leadbelly, a Negro, was born i Mooringsport, La. He was, b his own account, a tough ma with a liking for liquor and at 3 was imprisoned in Texas for lif on a murder charge. There th prisoners corrupted his surnam to Leadbelly. He was pardone after six years.**

**Unable to keep out of trouble Leadbelly was sentenced to te years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1930 for slashing si men in a knife fight. It wa there, four years later, that the late John Lomax, collector of folklore, first heard him. Through th efforts of Mr. Lomax, Leadbelly was pardoned once again. H came to New York, where he wo immediate renown.**

**Surviving are his widow, Mrs Martha Ledbetter; a daughter Mrs. A. Mae Richardson, and a sister.**



*Poet Allen Ginsberg at the grave of an old friend, Lead Belly, March 6, 1991*
*all color portrait photos by John Andrew Prime*



HUDDIE
LEAD BELLY
LEDBETTER

HUDDIE
(LEAD BELLY)
LEDBETTER
A LOUISIANA LEGEND

*Upper left: Lead Belly's former grave, Caddo Parish Upper right: James Dickey, spring 1993, photo by David Havird*
*Middle left: Maria Muldaur Middle right: Robert Plant Lower left: Bob Vernon, Tom Ayres, John Schexnaidre, circa 1981*
*Lower right: Lead Belly's grave today, cemetery behind Shiloh Baptist Church, Mooringsport, Louisiana*

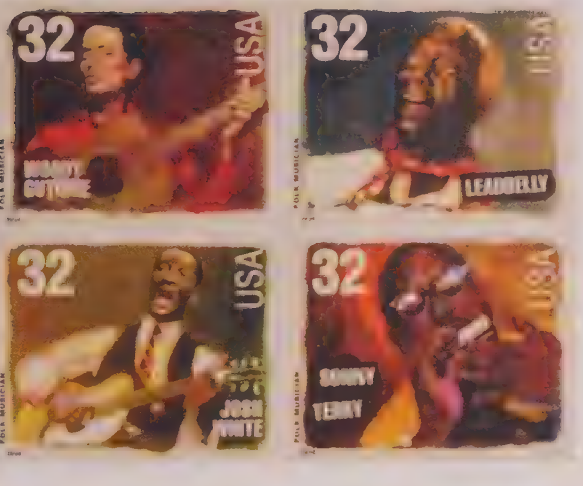
# REMEMBERING LEAD BELLY

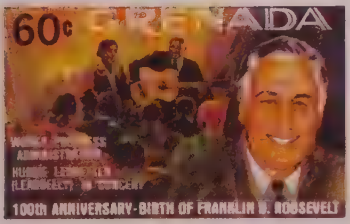
*"None of us ever learned how not to miss him."*
Richard S. Blacher, MD

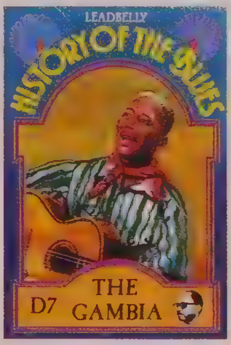
## Goodnight Lead Belly

Shoeless minstrel of the sun set down by the river.
Deep black flowers grow there now, where songs live on
like a strange Death Letter.
Children wash the earth with cups of doubt,
where his dark thorn voice knew them down and out.
His right hand struck one of his twelve old strings
he didn't have none, had none of those things —
and he was a poor, poor boy.
He was a stranger that blowed into your town,
but he went to where friends can be found.
Screaming like a wounded dove,
the old sad man wept for Irene's gone love:
"My baby left me. And she wouldn't come back no more.
My baby left me. And she wouldn't come back no more.
When my baby left me I didn't want nobody else."
Sitting on a stone with his heart in his hand,
no governor nor woman nor cellmate could understand.
His muscles tightened, his breath like steel,
quietly concealing tears only bluesmen feel.
His voice stopped singing, his eyes felt like lead,
he's gone today, with Shiloh Baptist Cemetery's dead.
Goodnight gone poet, the children say:
"Goodnight to the soul, to the songs, and the day
Goodnight to the man who'll lie down and pray."

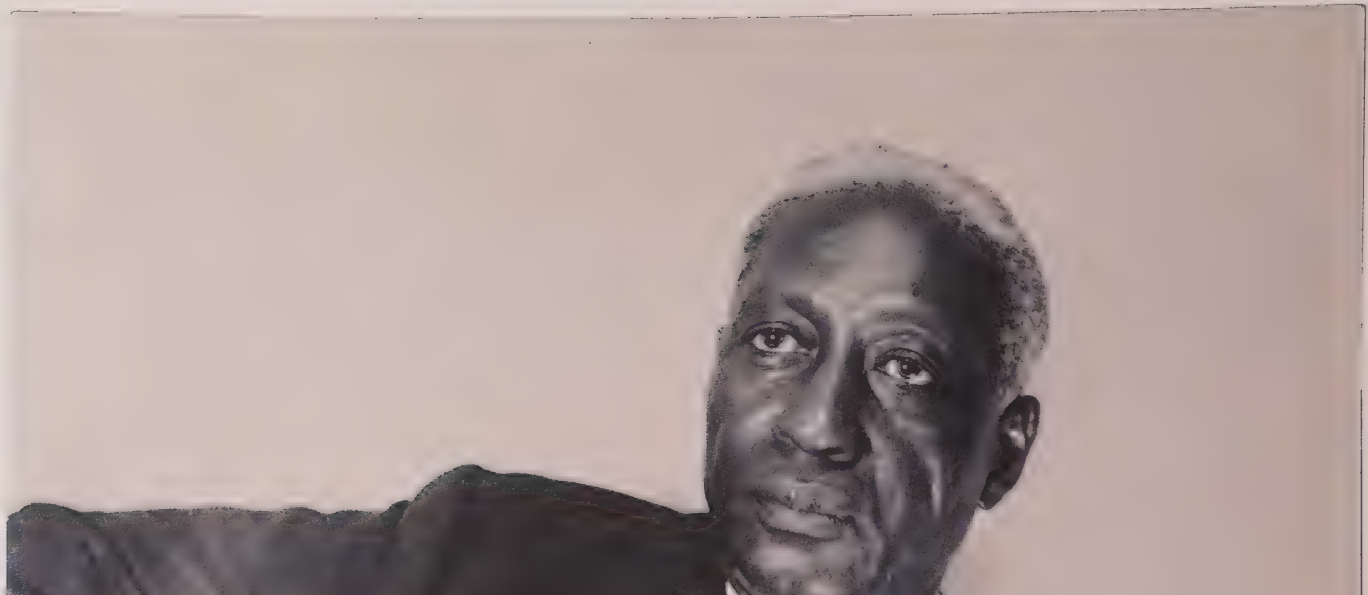
**Sean Singer**


32
USA
WOODY GUTHRIE
32
USA
LEADBELLY
32
USA
JOSH WHITE
32
USA
SONNY TERRY
FOLK MUSICIAN


60¢ GRENADA
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
HUDDIE LEDBETTER (LEADBELLY) IN CONCERT
100th ANNIVERSARY-BIRTH OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT


LEADBELLY
HISTORY OF THE BLUES
D7
THE GAMBIA

< *Martha Ledbetter holding a sculpture of Lead Belly by Joe Brown, 1955, photo by John Reynolds*



*"The first time I heard Lead Belly, that was it for me. He opened the door. He helped change British music. If it wasn't for Lead Belly I may never have been here."*

**Van Morrison**

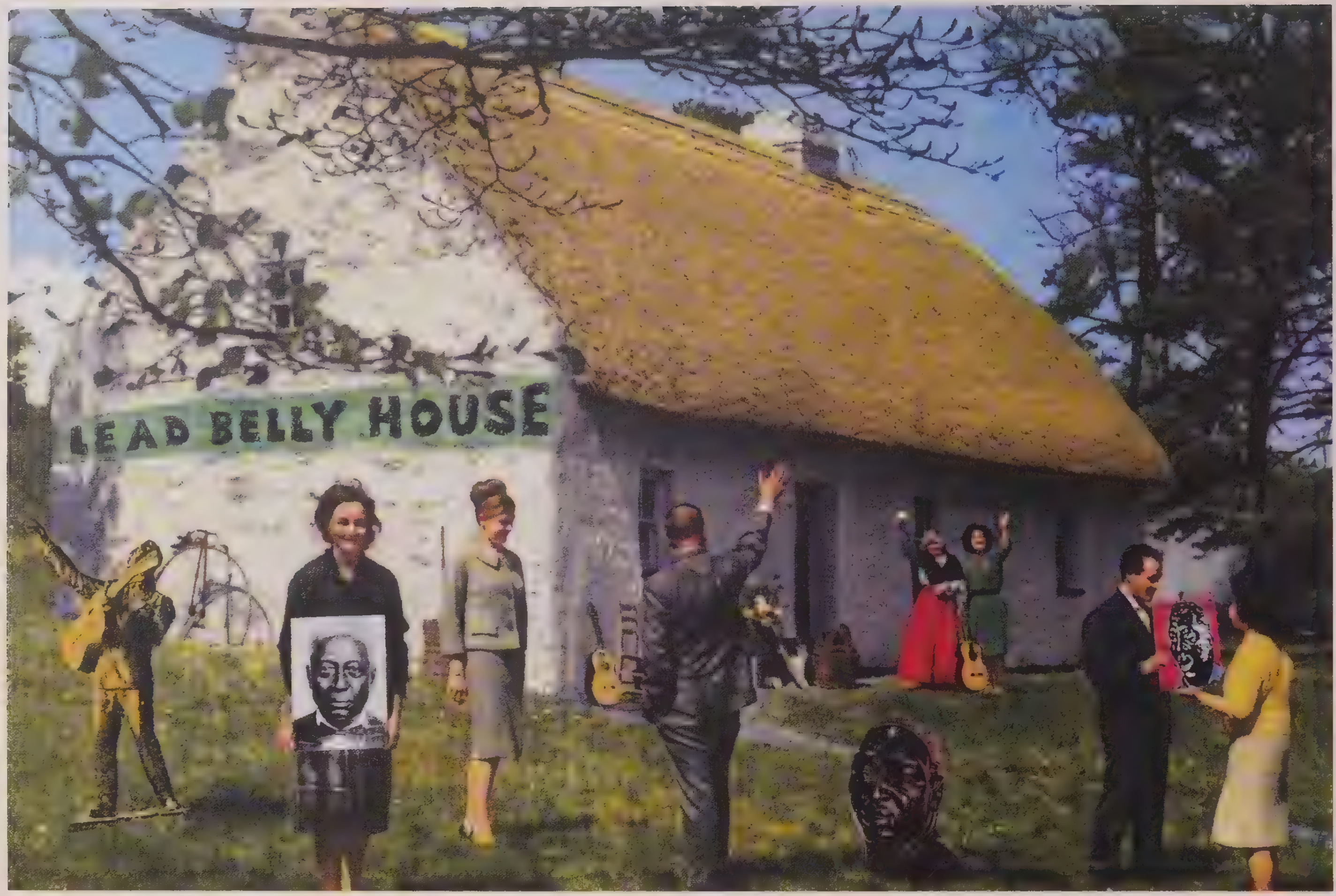
## Feel Like Going Home

When I was growing up, there always seemed to be music in the air. It drifted up from the street, from the radios of passing cars, from the restaurants and corner stores, from the windows of apartments across the way. At home, my mother often sang to herself — I have vivid memories of her singing while she was doing the dishes. My father loved to play his mandolin, and my brother Frank played the guitar. Actually, it was my father who was the guitar enthusiast, and the first music I remember hearing was by Django Reinhardt and his Hot Club of France Quintet. At that time, you could always hear an incredible range of music on the radio, everything from Italian folk songs to country & western. And my uncle Joe, my mother's brother, had an amazing record collection, which ranged from Gilbert and Sullivan to swing. He was one of the first people I could really talk to, and I think we related to each other because of our shared love for music.

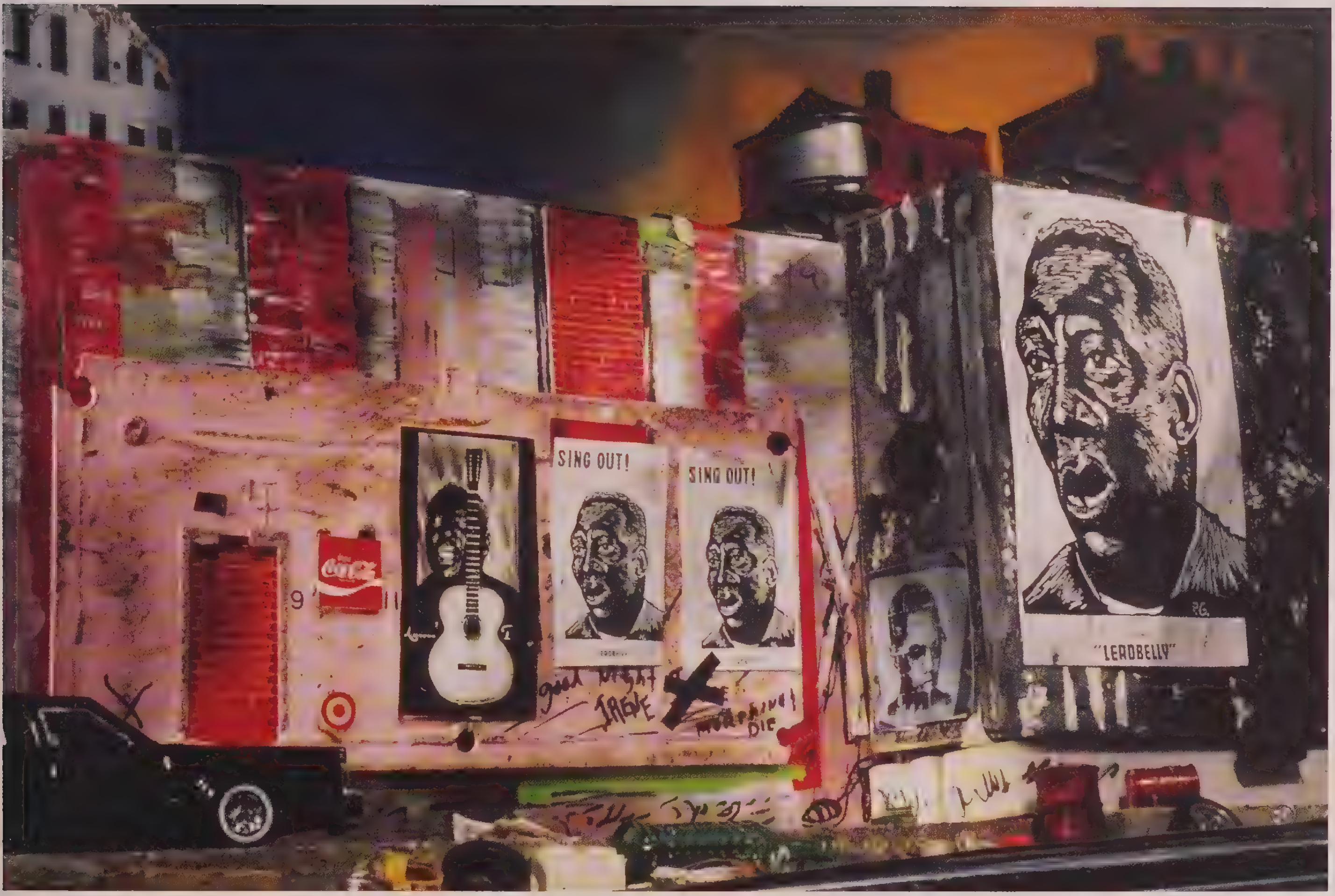
One day, around 1958, I remember hearing something that was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. I'll never forget the first time I heard the sound of that guitar. The music was demanding, "Listen to me!" I ran to get a pencil and paper and wrote down the name. The song was called "See See Rider," which I already knew from the Chuck Willis cover version. The name of the singer was Lead Belly. I got up to Sam Goody's on Forty-ninth Street as fast as I could, and I found an old Folkways record by Lead Belly, which had "See See Rider," "Roberta," "Black Snake Moan," and a few other songs. And I listened to it obsessively. Lead Belly's music opened something up for me. If I could have played guitar, really played it, I never would have become a filmmaker.

People like to think of the great blues singers as raw, instinctive, with talent and genius flowing from their fingertips. But John Lee Hooker, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and so many other amazing talents, more names than I have space for here, are some of the greatest artists America has ever had. When you listen to Lead Belly, or Son House, or Robert Johnson, or John Lee Hooker, or Charley Patton, or Muddy Waters, you're moved, your heart is shaken, you're carried and inspired by its visceral energy, and its rock solid emotional truth. You go right to the heart of what it is to be human, the condition of being human. That's the blues.

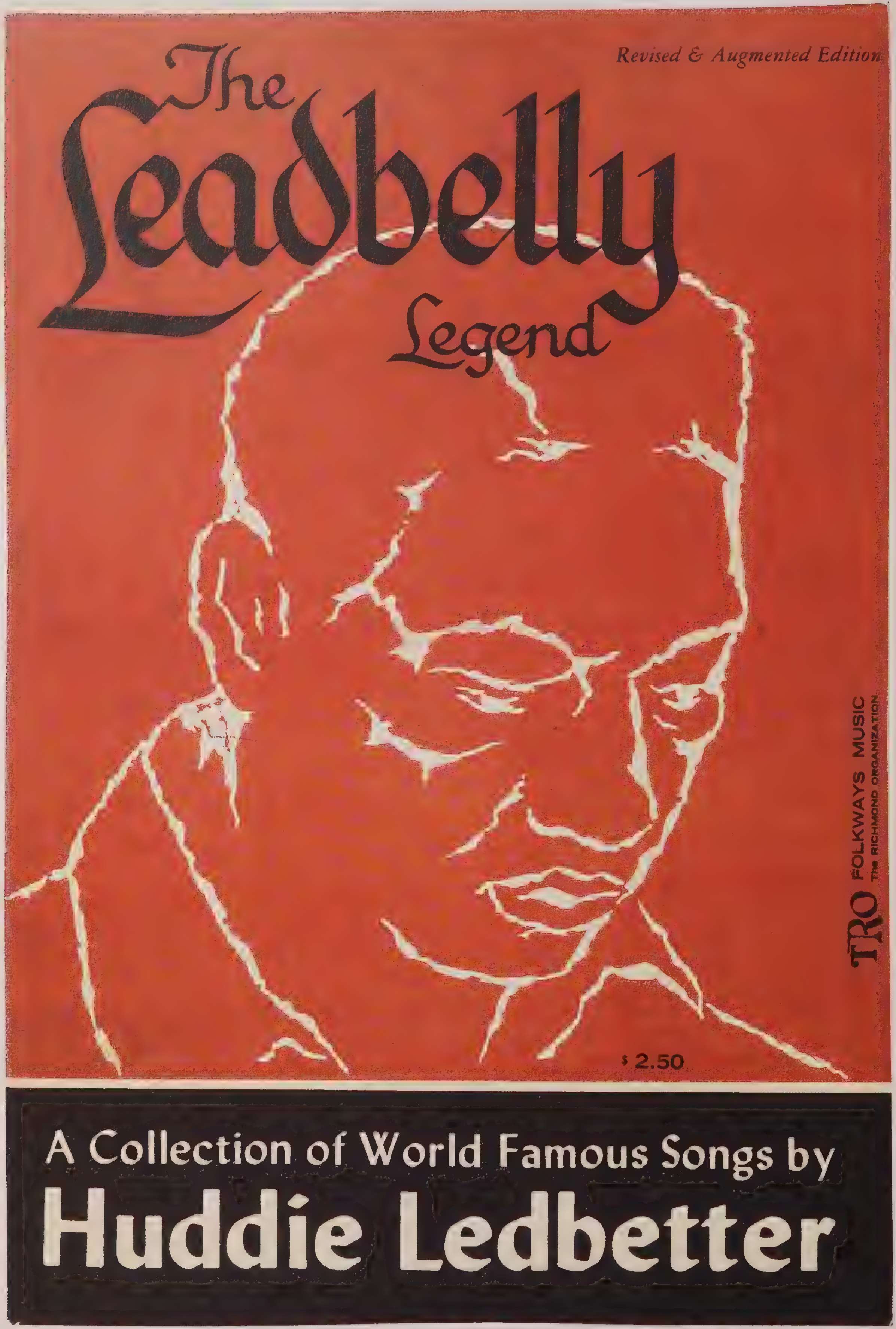
**Martin Scorsese**


LEAD BELLY HOUSE

*Lead Belly House, Co. Clare, Ireland, photo by Blind Willie O'Brien*


SING OUT!
SING OUT!
"LEADBELLY"
RG.
Coca-Cola
9
good night
IRENE
DIE

Ken Botto, photo collage



*Revised & Augmented Edition*

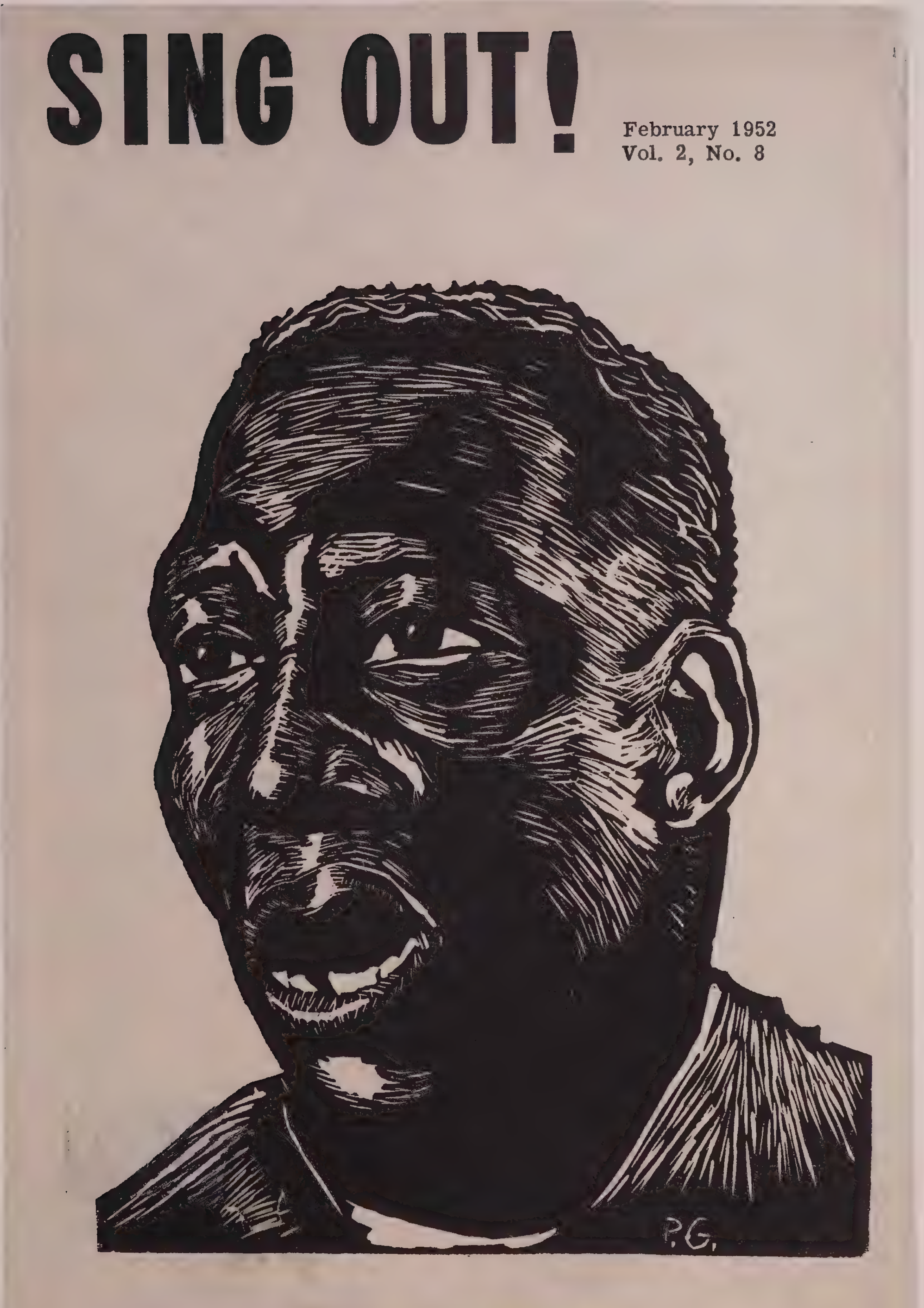
The Leadbelly Legend

TRO FOLKWAYS MUSIC
The RICHMOND ORGANIZATION

$ 2.50

A Collection of World Famous Songs by

**Huddie Ledbetter**

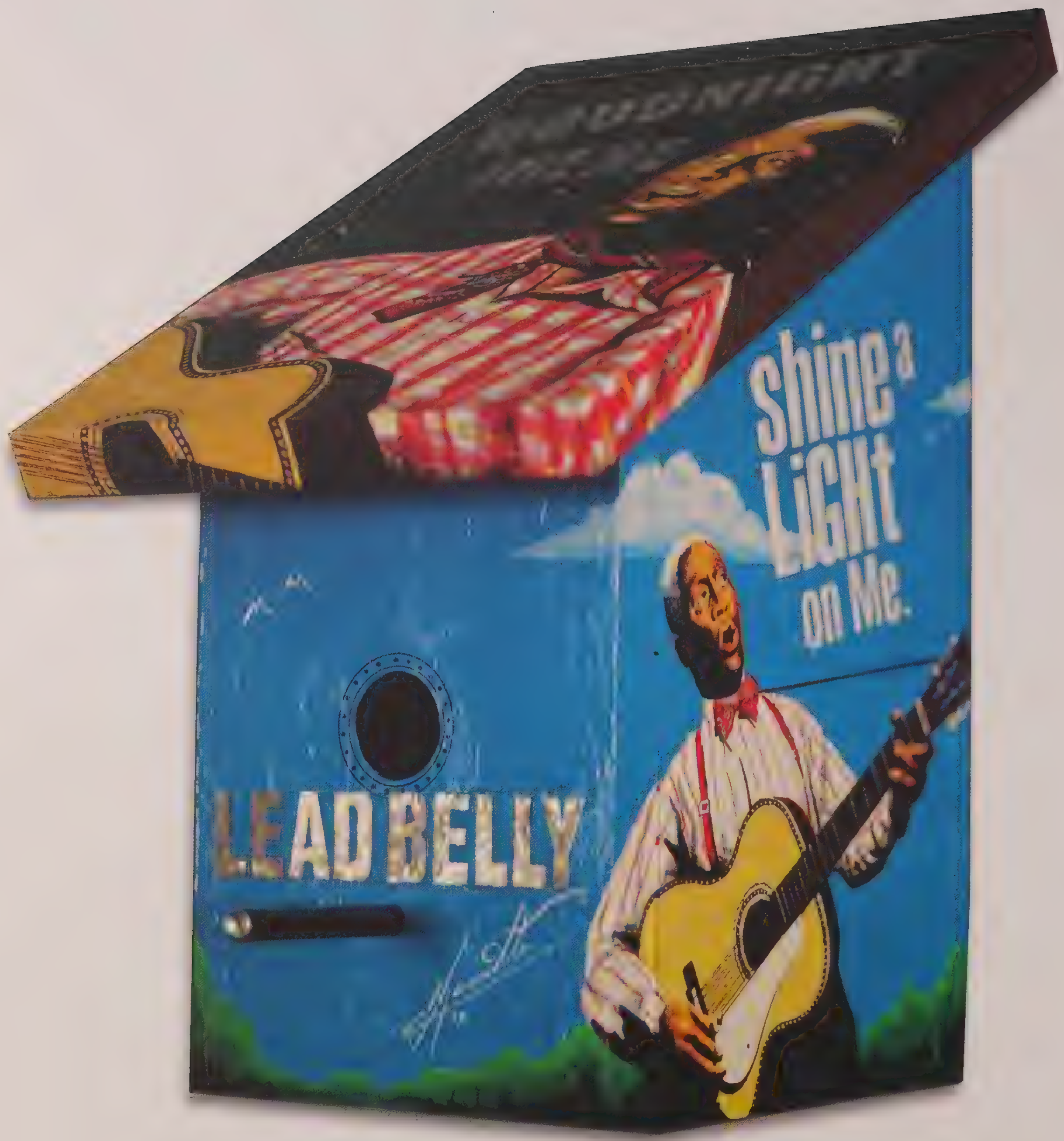


SING OUT!

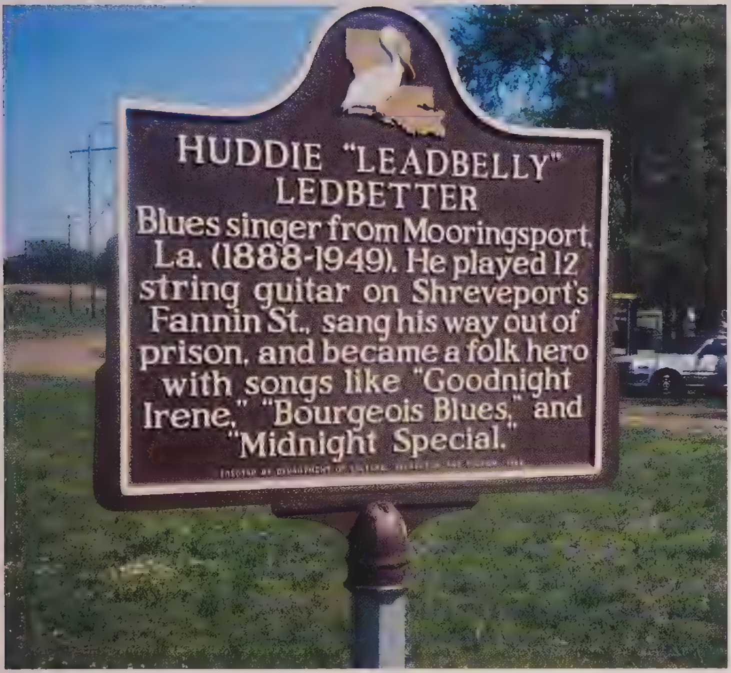
February 1952
Vol. 2, No. 8

"LEADBELLY"

*Peter Gordon, woodcut*

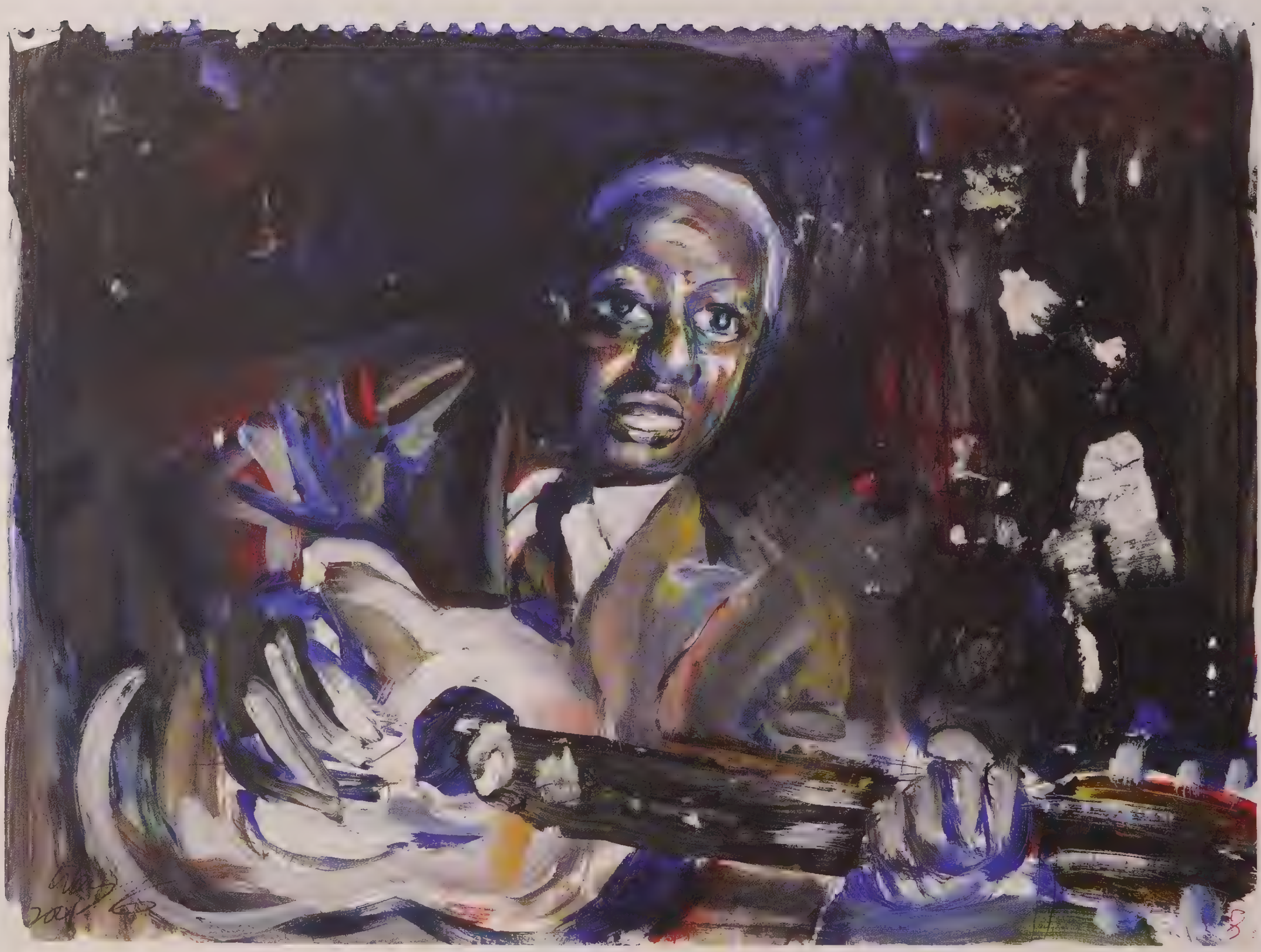

Shine a LiGHt on Me.
LEAD BELLY

*Painted birdhouse by Neal Hamilton*

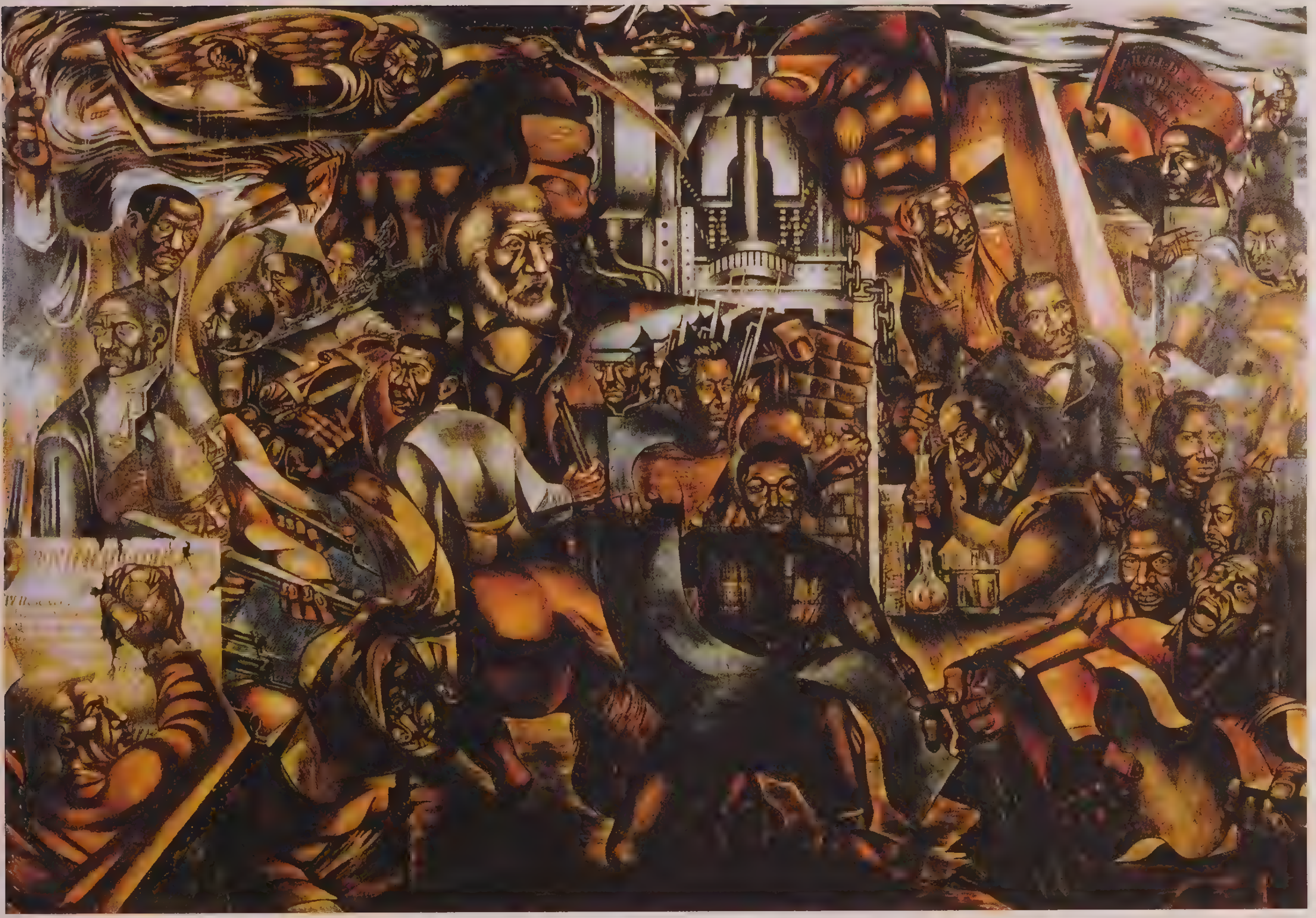

HUDDIE "LEADBELLY" LEDBETTER
Blues singer from Mooringsport, La. (1888-1949). He played 12 string guitar on Shreveport's Fannin St., sang his way out of prison, and became a folk hero with songs like "Goodnight Irene," "Bourgeois Blues," and "Midnight Special."

LEADBELLY
Cultural HEROES

*Upper left: Caddo Lake memorial marker near Oil City    Upper right: Model photo for Jessie Pitts, Jr. sculpture*
*Lower left: Bust in Nashville Airport    Lower right: Tiny Robinson with Jessie Pitts, Jr. sculpture, Shreveport*



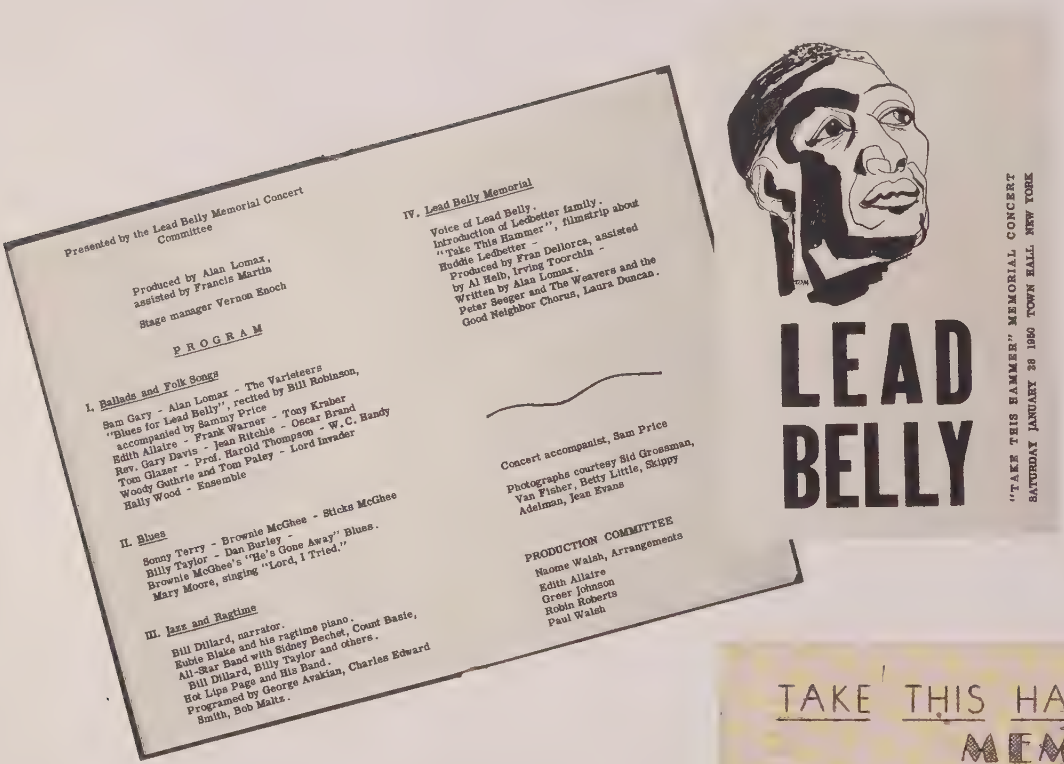
Wayne Jiang, watercolor



*Charles White, "Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America", mural, Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia*
*Lead Belly, lower right corner*

*"It's a shame all you people were not around when Lead Belly and Martha needed the paid bookings."*

**Oscar Brand**



Presented by the Lead Belly Memorial Concert
Committee

Produced by Alan Lomax,
assisted by Francis Martin

Stage manager Vernon Enoch

PROGRAM

I. Ballads and Folk Songs

Sam Gary - Alan Lomax - The Varieteers
"Blues for Lead Belly", recited by Bill Robinson,
accompanied by Sammy Price
Edith Allaire - Frank Warner - Tony Kraber
Rev. Gary Davis - Jean Ritchie - Oscar Brand
Tom Glazer - Prof. Harold Thompson - W.C. Handy
Woody Guthrie and Tom Paley - Lord Invader
Hally Wood - Ensemble

II. Blues

Sonny Terry - Brownie McGhee - Sticks McGhee
Billy Taylor - Dan Burley -
Brownie McGhee's "He's Gone Away" Blues.
Mary Moore, singing "Lord, I Tried."

III. Jazz and Ragtime

Bill Dillard, narrator.
Eubie Blake and his ragtime piano.
All-Star Band with Sidney Bechet, Count Basie,
Bill Dillard, Billy Taylor and others.
Hot Lips Page and His Band.
Programed by George Avakian, Charles Edward
Smith, Bob Maltz.

IV. Lead Belly Memorial

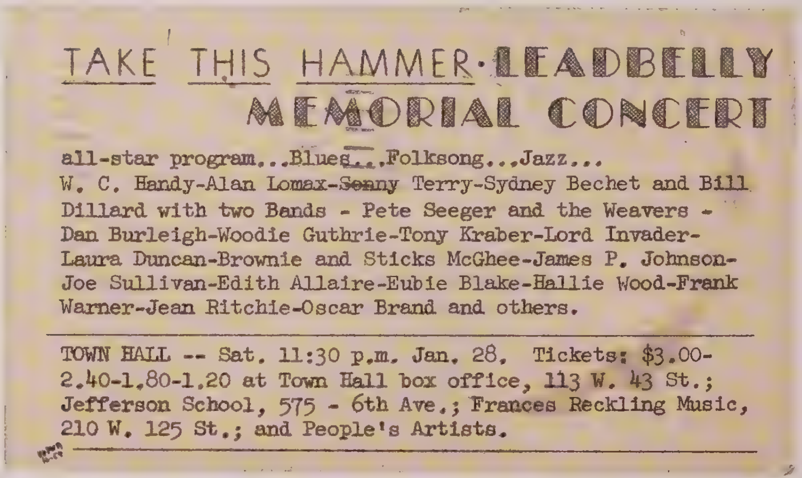
Voice of Lead Belly.
Introduction of Ledbetter family.
"Take This Hammer", filmstrip about
Huddie Ledbetter -
Produced by Fran Dellorca, assisted
by Al Helb, Irving Toorchin -
Written by Alan Lomax.
Peter Seeger and The Weavers and the
Good Neighbor Chorus, Laura Duncan.

Concert accompanist, Sam Price

Photographs courtesy Sid Grossman,
Van Fisher, Betty Little, Skippy
Adelman, Jean Evans

PRODUCTION COMMITTEE
Naome Walsh, Arrangements
Edith Allaire
Greer Johnson
Robin Roberts
Paul Walsh

LEAD
BELLY
"TAKE THIS HAMMER" MEMORIAL CONCERT
SATURDAY JANUARY 28 1950 TOWN HALL NEW YORK



TAKE THIS HAMMER · LEADBELLY
MEMORIAL CONCERT

all-star program...Blues...Folksong...Jazz...
W. C. Handy-Alan Lomax-Sonny Terry-Sydney Bechet and Bill Dillard with two Bands - Pete Seeger and the Weavers - Dan Burleigh-Woodie Guthrie-Tony Kraber-Lord Invader-Laura Duncan-Brownie and Sticks McGhee-James P. Johnson-Joe Sullivan-Edith Allaire-Eubie Blake-Hallie Wood-Frank Warner-Jean Ritchie-Oscar Brand and others.

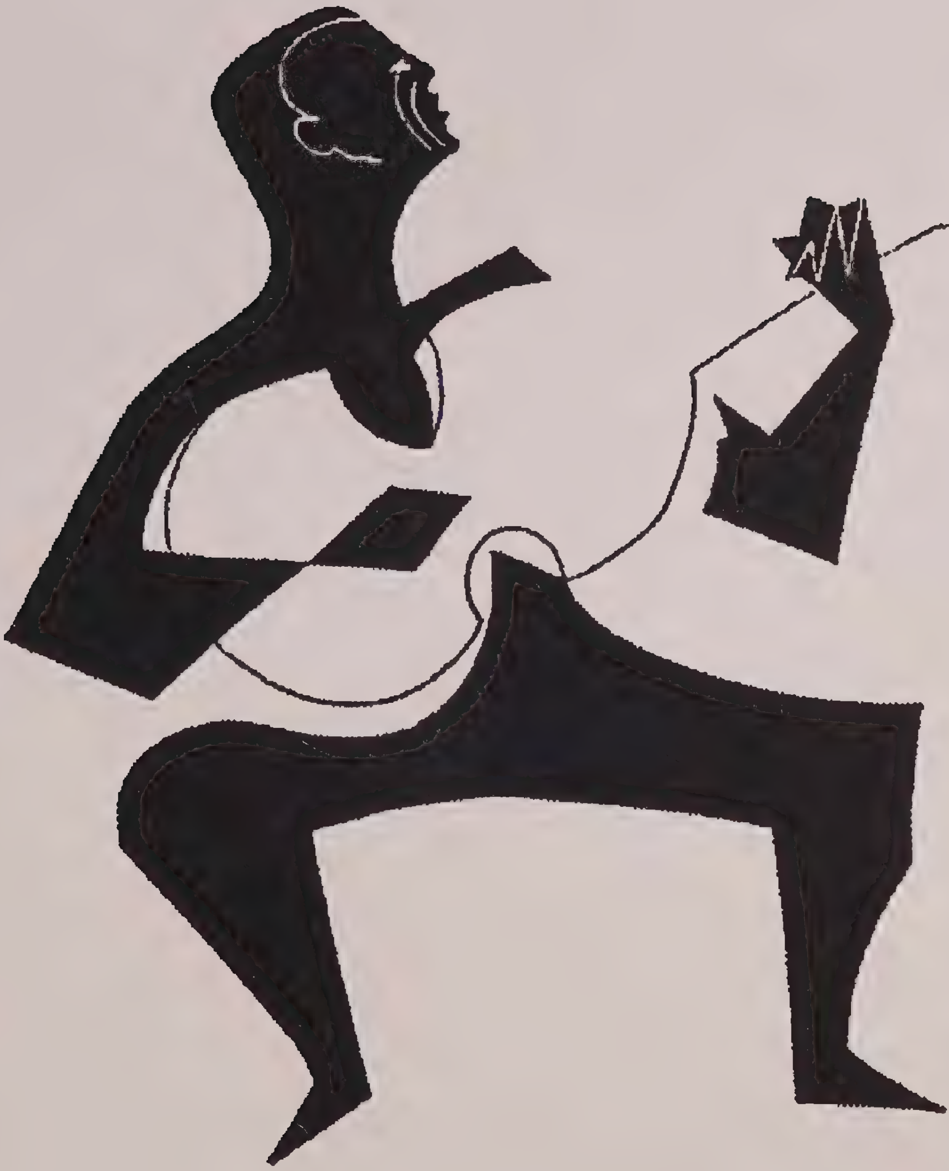
TOWN HALL -- Sat. 11:30 p.m. Jan. 28. Tickets: $3.00-2.40-1.80-1.20 at Town Hall box office, 113 W. 43 St.; Jefferson School, 575 - 6th Ave.; Frances Reckling Music, 210 W. 125 St.; and People's Artists.

Footnote: Huddie (Lead Belly) Ledbetter, often called "the best folk singer of them all," died on Dec. 7. Saturday at midnight as many of his admirers as could get into Town Hall attended a memorial concert presented by a large number of his colleagues.

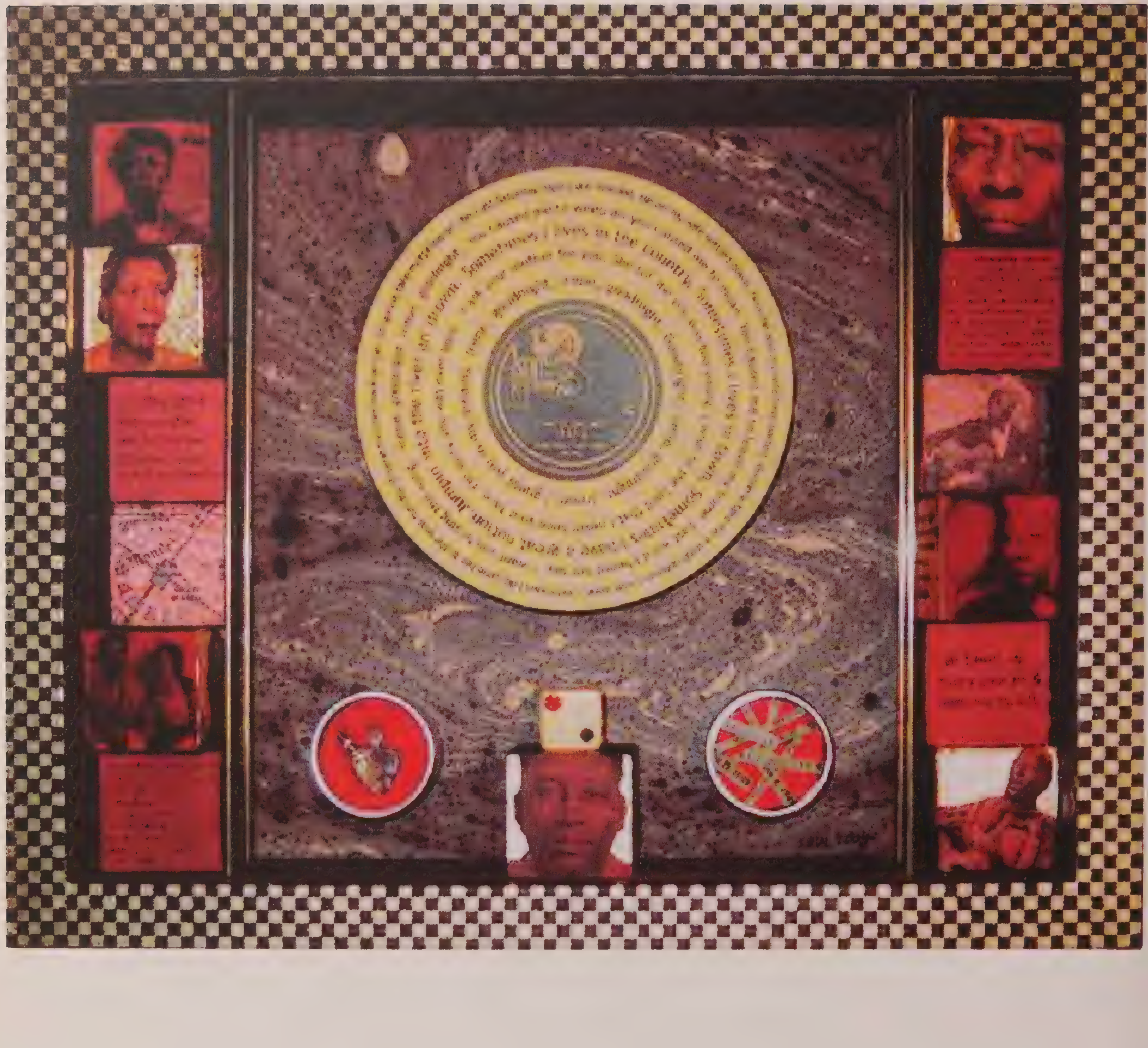
Lead Belly's famous twelve-string guitar was suspended in the center of the grey curtain at the rear of the dimly lit stage for all to see. Seated on the stage and circulating about were roughly two dozen other American minstrels, each carrying an instrument and playing it during his few moments at the microphone. Alan Lomax, son of the man who "discovered" the late singer, narrated and acted as master of ceremonies.

The first half of the program brought such entertainers as Woody Guthrie, the Trinidadian Lord Invader, harmonica-playing Sonny Terry, the composer of "St. Louis Blues", W.C. Handy, Oscar Brand, Edith Allaire, Tom Glazer, Sidney Bechet (playing his saxophone to the accompaniment of Count Bassie), and Brownie McGhee. The attentive audience gave heavy applause to the Rev. Gary Davis, blind singer from the Deep South, and Jean Ritchie.

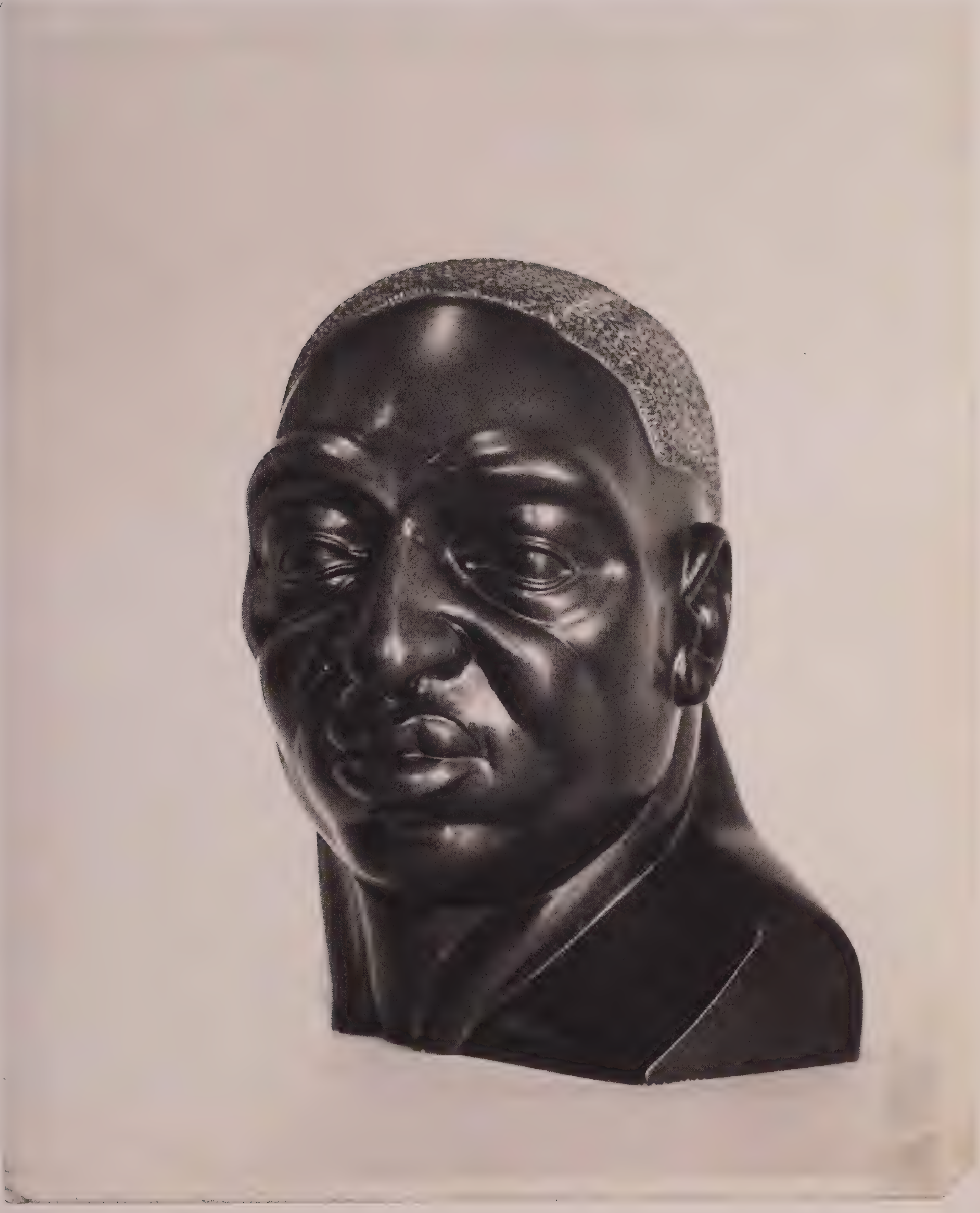
The most ambitious number was reserved for the end, but it had to be sandwiched in because of the late hour. It was a film strip of Lead Belly's life, with comments by Bill Dillard and accompanied with evangelical spirit by Peter Seeger and The Weavers, and the Good Neighbor Chorus. The audience joined in on familiar songs. Hot Lips Page brought his band on stage to close the event as the small hours grew larger.



Abe Greiss

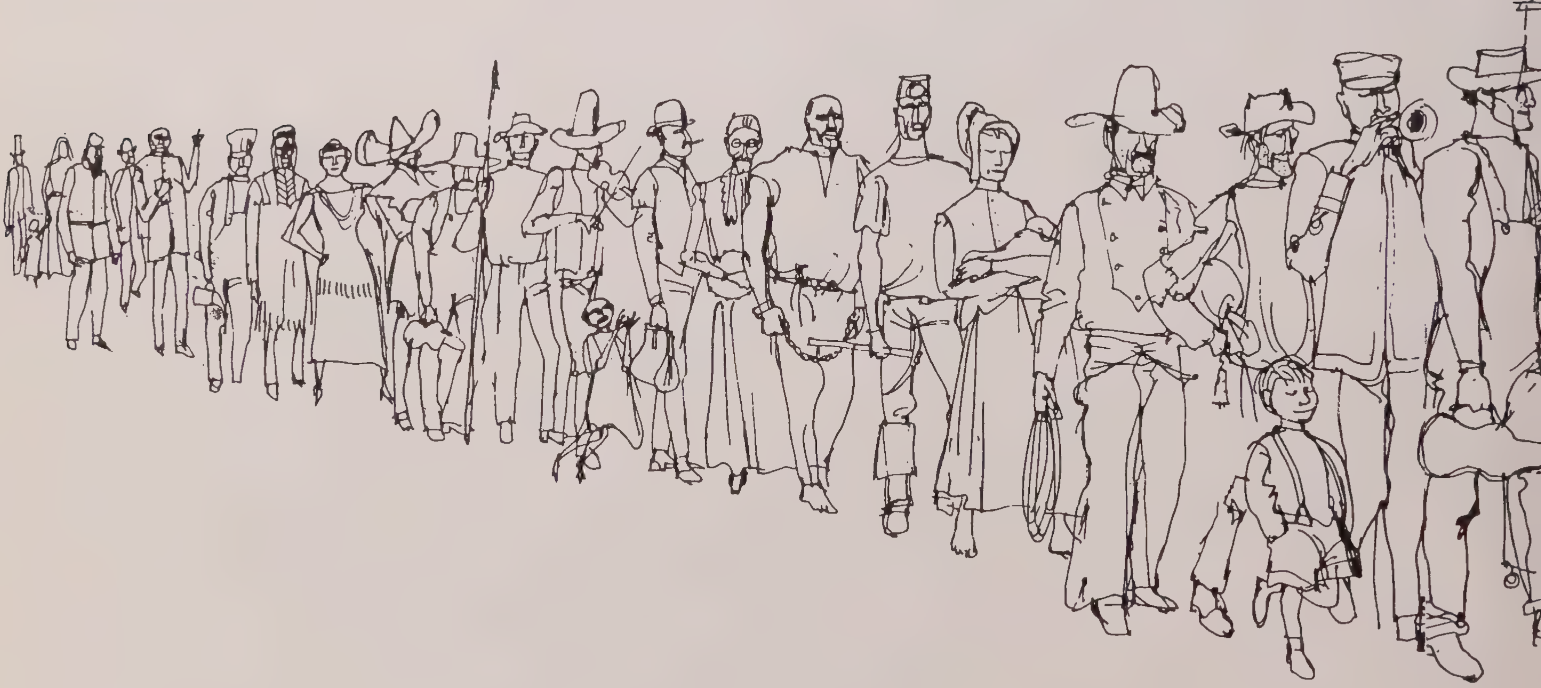


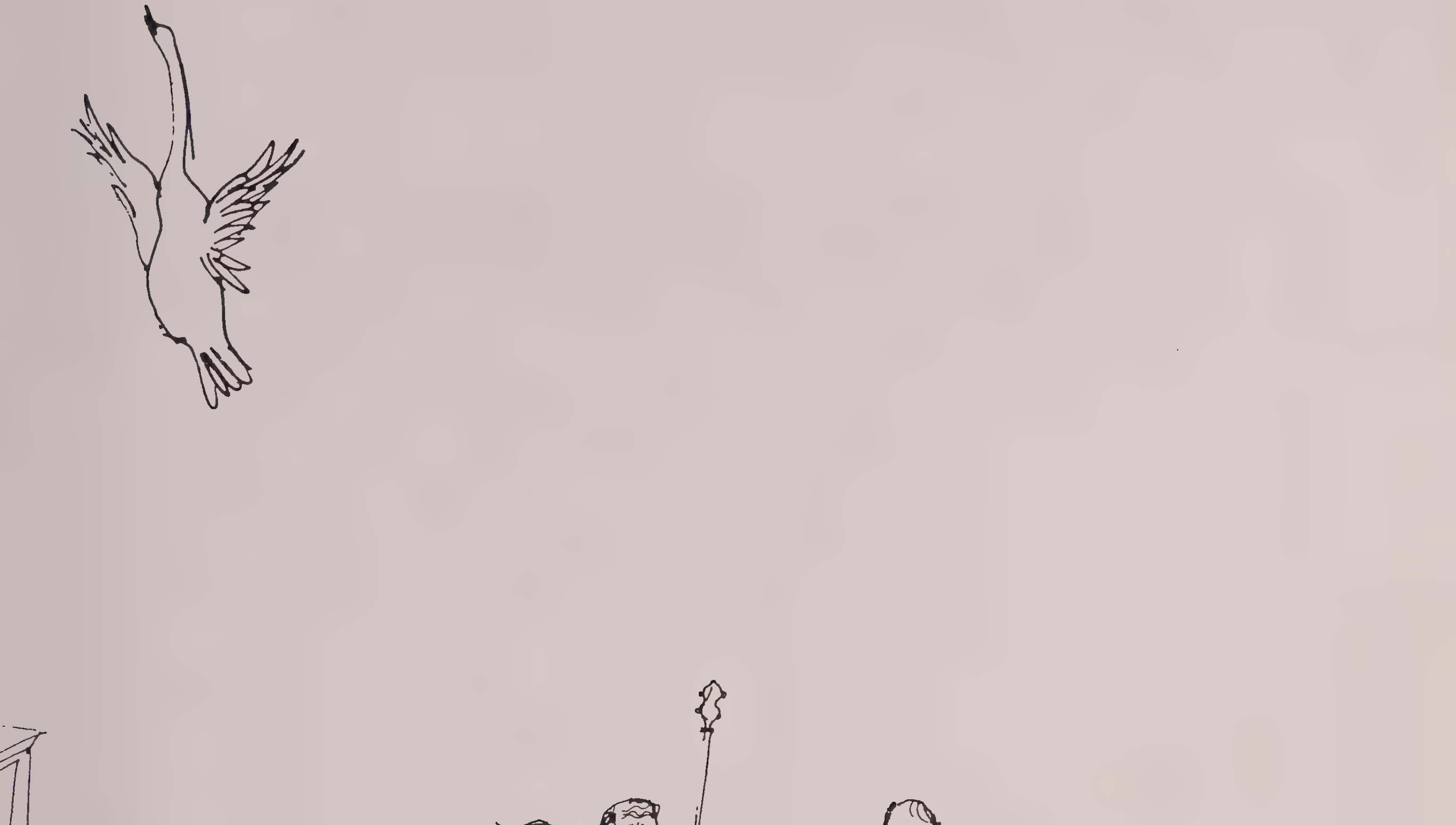
Veronika Soul, Construction Box



*Serpentine black marble sculpture by Michael G. Owen, Jr.*
*Dallas Museum of Art*

Dear John / Thanks for the "lotsa Erics" mailing.
My "heros" are (l. to r.) Jimmy Yancey / Bessie Smith / Gary Davis /
Josh White / Sonny Terry (seated) / Pete Seeger / Lead Belly (front &
center / Burl Ives / Woody Guthrie; then the five us that
sang on the records, Ramblin' Jack / Jackie Washington / Carolyn
Hester / Rolf Cahn / Me. Both book & record were a compilation
of twenty songs, five Leadbellys but "as sung by..." By the
time I did the drawing I met everybody but Yancey, Smith
and Lead. All those who thought he was over six feet gave
me a hard time. I think I got it about right. All best / Eric





*Letter to John Reynolds from Eric von Schmidt*

# GOODNIGHT, IRENE

*Words and Music by Huddie Ledbetter and John Lomax*

Featured and Recorded by FRANK SINATRA on Columbia Records

**SPENCER MUSIC CORP.**
New York 19, N.Y.

# GOODNIGHT, IRENE

*"The poor boy wrote a million songs, Yes he wrote day and night.*
*Well, the song I loved to hear him sing Irene good night."*
**Sonny Terry**

## Irene, Goodnight

'Irene' was Lead Belly's signature song. He sang it frequently throughout his fifty-year career. Lead Belly's many and varied audiences always called for 'Irene'. In his recorded concert at the University of Texas in Austin five months before his death, Lead Belly has the audience singing along:

*"I love Irene, God knows I do,*
*Love her till the sea runs dry.*
*And if Irene turns her back on me*
*I'm gonna take morphine and die."*

Notwithstanding the claims of others on parts and all of 'Irene', the song was Lead Belly's — it belonged to him. A close look at the lyrics and how Lead Belly subtilely changed them over the years, reveals a portrait of the artist, complex yet true to his basic principles, even with the accumulative addition of life's joys and disappointments. Thus, 'Irene' became a far more enriched expression when Lead Belly sang it in Hollywood during World War II, than when he sang it with Blind Lemon Jefferson in Dallas before World War I.

Leadbelly
Huddie Ledbetter
GOODNIGHT, IRENE
Fantasy

For Lead Belly, 'Irene' conveyed the measure of his life's relationships with people and circumstances. He was fundamentally an optimistic and forward-looking person who fought against being enslaved by bitter memories. Each note of 'Irene' was a positive statement; each note drew another breath of fresh air, which he sent back out as creative expression.

While Lead Belly clearly loved the song 'Irene', the ruckus, the myriad interpretations, and the grabbing on to it for all its commercial worth might have caused him to give new emphasis to the 'Irene' couplet:

*"I wish to the Lord I never seen your face,*
*I'm sorry you ever was born."*

In their 1936 book on Lead Belly, the John Lomax acknowledges that 'Irene' was his most popular song with the Angola prison inmates. Even though the song was of Stephen Foster vintage and it was not a Negro folk melody, the Lomax predicted 'Irene' would become the "best known of American folk songs." On this final point there is little dispute. Less than fifteen years after the prophesy of popular success for 'Irene', the song rocketed to the top of the pop charts and sold 2 million copies. Acknowledgement, recognition, royalties, and copyrights became a honeycomb of dispute between

"I just came back from three months in Yugoslavia. While there we were taking a bus from Zegreb to Ljubijana one day. The bus driver was listening to folk music on the radio. This one had a Ljubijana station on — and at one point we sat up and took notice — it was playing...'Irena, lahko noc' — 'Goodnight, Irene' in Slovenian."

**Wayles Browne**

Lead Belly's family, friends, and fans.

Lead Belly's earliest musical lessons were provided by his uncle, Terrell Ledbetter who was a guitar-player, music-maker in the Northern Louisiana/East Texas area. Lead Belly photo archivist John Reynolds has determined that the Haverly's Minstrel Show played Shreveport in the late 1880s with Lew Randall doing his popular number 'Irene, Goodnight'. This moon-June-spoon-tune bears no resemblance to Lead Belly's composition, except in title.

Lead Belly's attributed the notion of 'Irene' to his uncle. Ms. Irene Campell, a long-time Marshall, Texas, school teacher and niece of Lead Belly, has often stated that she is the namesake of the song. Alan Lomax, upon the death of Martha Promise Ledbetter in 1968 said that "Lead Belly always regarded his wife as the 'Irene' of his famous song."

Pete Seeger, as a member of the Weavers whose version of 'Goodnight, Irene' produced by Gordon Jenkins sold two million copies in 1950, has noted that this nationwide popularity was the final posthumous, ironic touch for Lead Belly in a life filled largely with disappointment and frustration. The song, published by Howard Spencer Richmond, was first released on the Decca label as the "B" side with the novelty song 'Tzena, Tzena, Tzena'.

In the summer of 1950 seven other record companies issued eleven versions of 'Irene' by Frank Sinatra, Red Foley, Roger Williams, Les Paul and Mary Ford, Jo Stafford and others. The song was also translated into French and titled "Bon Soir, Lili". New York Times critic Gilbert Millstein reckoned that this national popularity meant 'Irene' was being heard 1,400 times a minute across the country in 1950.

Follow-up recordings included 'Get Lost, Irene', 'Wake Up, Irene' and 'Please Say Goodnight To The Guy, Irene' (So I Can Get Some Sleep). 'Irene' has achieved extraordinary popularity and recognition which continues into the 21st century. At a recent song recital given by Pete Seeger at a Senior Citizen facility, the residents, all aged and some quite infirm, virtually came alive and joined in singing with Seeger when he strummed up 'Irene'.

In all of Lead Belly's renditions of 'Irene' the final stanza is always a 'down-home' moan which registers on most listeners in heart and soul. 'Irene', the song Lead Belly loved, teaches us in the last stanza of lyrics:

*"You caused me to weep, and*
*you caused me to moan,*
*you caused me to leave my home;*
*the very last words I heard her say,*
*'Won't you sing me one last song.'*
Irene, Goodnight..."
Lead Belly has the audience singing along:
*"I love Irene, God knows I do,*
*Love her till the sea runs dry.*
*And if Irene turns her back on me*
*I'm gonna take morphine and die."*

**Sean Killeen**

GOOD NIGHT
Irene
COCKTAIL LOUNGE

*Good Night Irene cocktail lounge,*
*Montreal, Canada*

**Irene heads East...**

*Sometimes I stay in Hong-Kong,*
*Sometimes I stay in Japan,*
*Sometimes I go, away to Penang,*
*But mostely I stay in Thailand.*

*Irene, Goodnight.......*

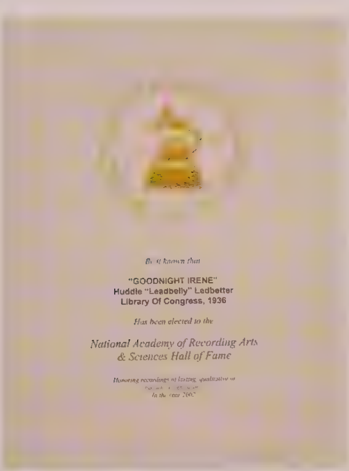
*In Japan girls wear kimono,*
*In Hong-Kong they wear cheongsam,*
*But my girl wears an ao-dai,*
*Cause she comes from Viet-Nam.*

*Irene, Goodnight.......*

*Some people drink scoth and soda,*
*Some people drink Singha beer,*
*Some people drink rye whiskey,*
*But most people drink Polaris on the rocks.*

*Irene, Goodnight.......*

**Heard in a Bangkok nightclub,**
**February 1968**



*Be it known that*

"GOODNIGHT IRENE"
Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter
Library Of Congress, 1936

*Has been elected to the*

*National Academy of Recording Arts*
*& Sciences Hall of Fame*

*Honoring recordings of lasting, qualitative or*

**Irene's lyrical ancestors...**

Lover's song — usually sung as a woman's lament

*I love that man, O God, I do,*
*I love him till the day he die;*
*If I thought that he didn't love me,*
*I'd eat morphine and die.*

**Folk Songs of The South**
by J.H. Cox
Howard University Press,
1924

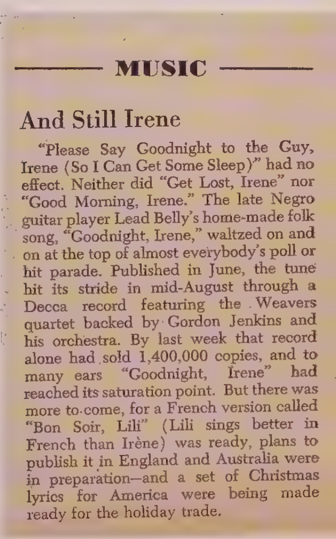
*Well, I ask her - whuk -*
*Mother for her - whuk,*
*An' she said she - whuk -*
*Was too young - whuk,*
*Lord I wish'd I'd - whuk*
*Never seen her - whuk*
*An' I wish'd she - whuk,*
*Never bin born - whuk.*

**The Negro and His Songs**
by Howard W. Odum & Guy B. Johnson
U. of North Carolina Press,
1925

*You cause me to weep,*
*You cause me to mourn,*
*You cause me to leave my happy home.*

**Folk Songs of American Negro**
by John Wesley Work
Fisk University Press, 1915

**Compiled by John Reynolds**



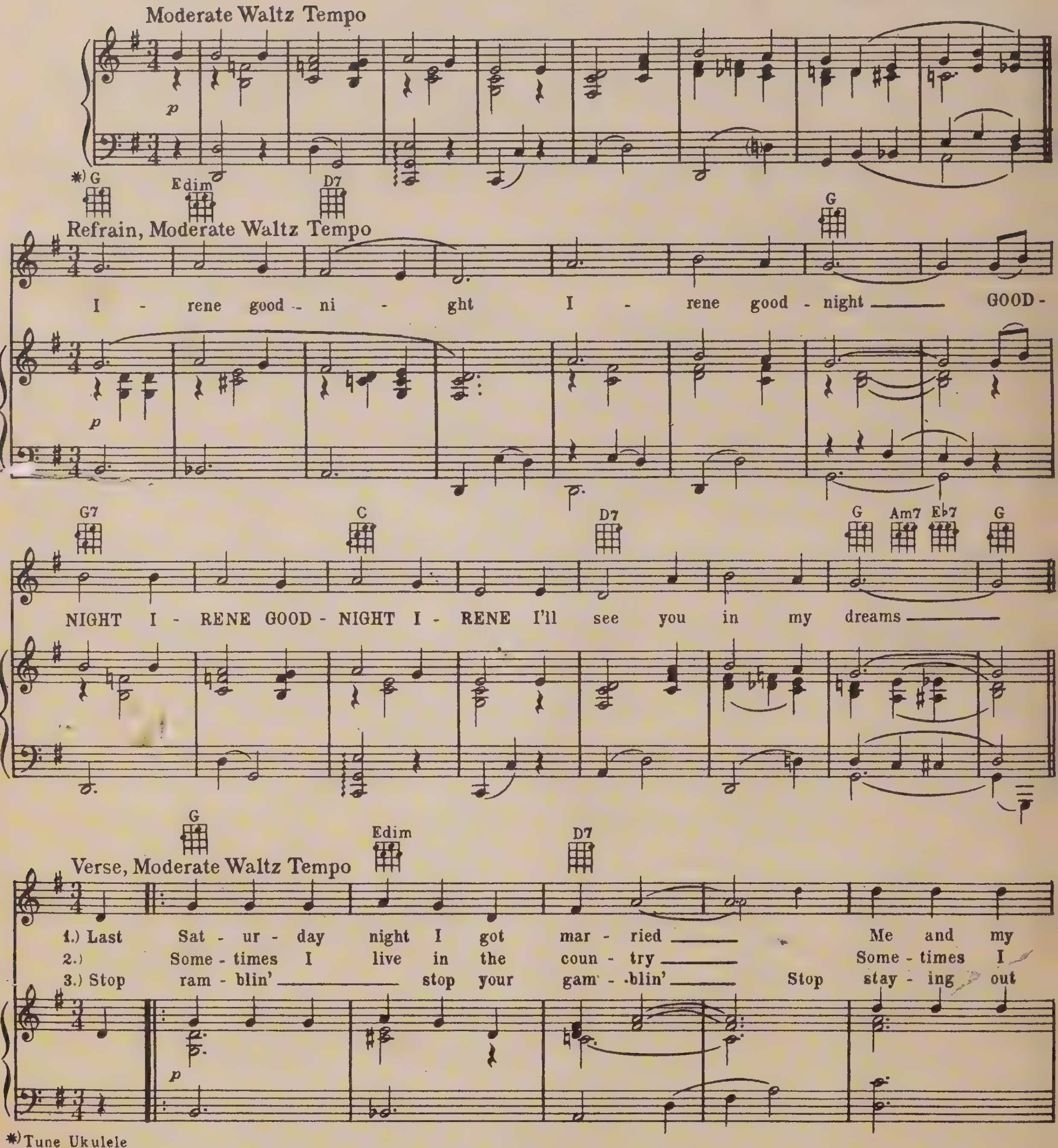
**MUSIC**

**And Still Irene**

"Please Say Goodnight to the Guy, Irene (So I Can Get Some Sleep)" had no effect. Neither did "Get Lost, Irene" nor "Good Morning, Irene." The late Negro guitar player Lead Belly's home-made folk song, "Goodnight, Irene," waltzed on and on at the top of almost everybody's poll or hit parade. Published in June, the tune hit its stride in mid-August through a Decca record featuring the Weavers quartet backed by Gordon Jenkins and his orchestra. By last week that record alone had sold 1,400,000 copies, and to many ears "Goodnight, Irene" had reached its saturation point. But there was more to come, for a French version called "Bon Soir, Lili" (Lili sings better in French than Irène) was ready, plans to publish it in England and Australia were in preparation—and a set of Christmas lyrics for America were being made ready for the holiday trade.

# Goodnight, Irene

Words and Music by
HUDDIE LEDBETTER
JOHN LOMAX


Moderate Waltz Tempo
p
*) G
Edim
D7
Refrain, Moderate Waltz Tempo
G
I - rene good - ni - ght I - rene good - night GOOD -
p
G7
C
D7
G Am7 Eb7 G
NIGHT I - RENE GOOD - NIGHT I - RENE I'll see you in my dreams
G
Edim
D7
Verse, Moderate Waltz Tempo
1.) Last Sat - ur - day night I got mar - ried Me and my
2.) Some - times I live in the coun - try Some - times I
3.) Stop ram - blin' stop your gam - blin' Stop stay - ing out
p

*) Tune Ukulele

A D F# B

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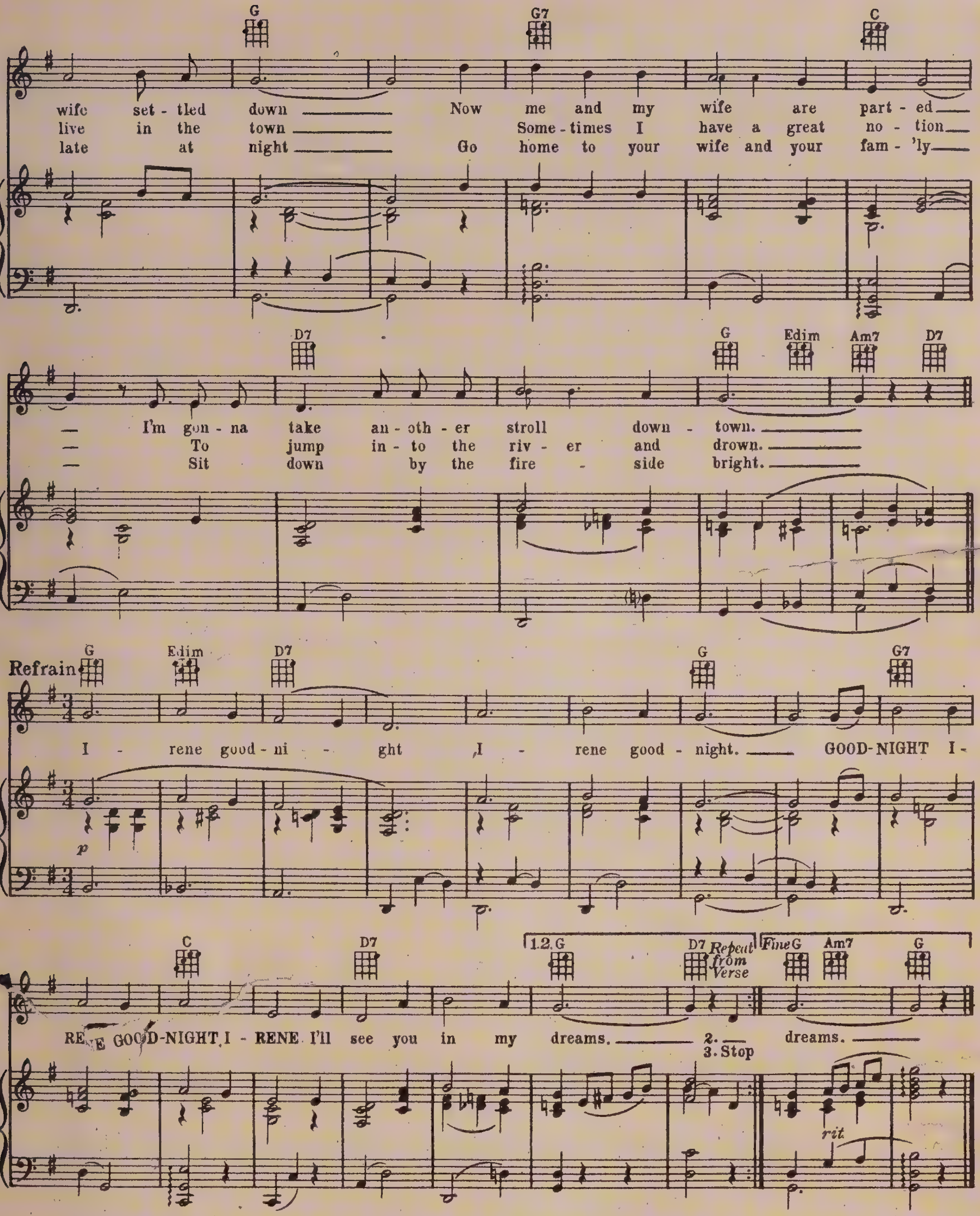

G
G7
C
wife set - tled down Now me and my wife are part - ed
live in the town Some - times I have a great no - tion
late at night Go home to your wife and your fam - 'ly
D7
G Edim Am7 D7
— I'm gon - na take an - oth - er stroll down - town.
— To jump in - to the riv - er and drown.
— Sit down by the fire - side bright.
Refrain
G Edim D7 G G7
I - rene good - ni - ght I - rene good - night. GOOD-NIGHT I -
p
C D7 1.2. G D7 Repeat from Verse Fine G Am7 G
RENE GOOD-NIGHT I - RENE I'll see you in my dreams. 2. 3. Stop dreams.
rit.

## Added Verses

I asked your mother for you
She told me you was too young
I wish to the Lord I'd never seen your face
Or heard your lying tongue.

I love Irene, God knows, I do
Love her till the seas run dry
And if Irene turns her back on me
I'm gonna take morphine and die.

*Goodnight, Irene credits: Words and Music by Huddie Ledbetter and John A. Lomax, TRO ©1936 (renewed) and 1950 (renewed). LUDLOW MUSIC, INC., New York, N.Y. International, Copyright Secured*

*"Lead Belly... is almost as necessary to the musical diet as potassium is to the physical diet. I keep coming back to Lead Belly."*

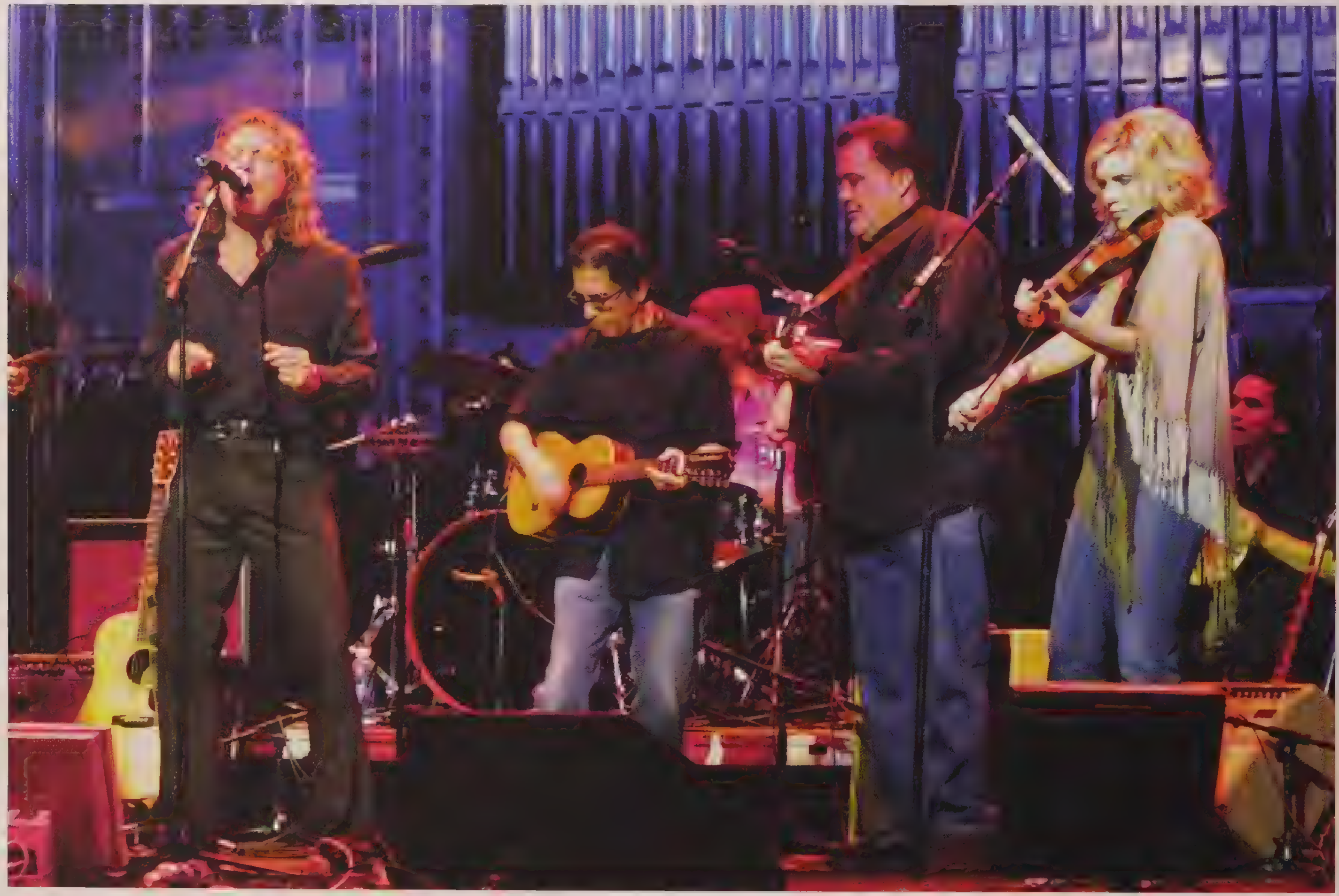
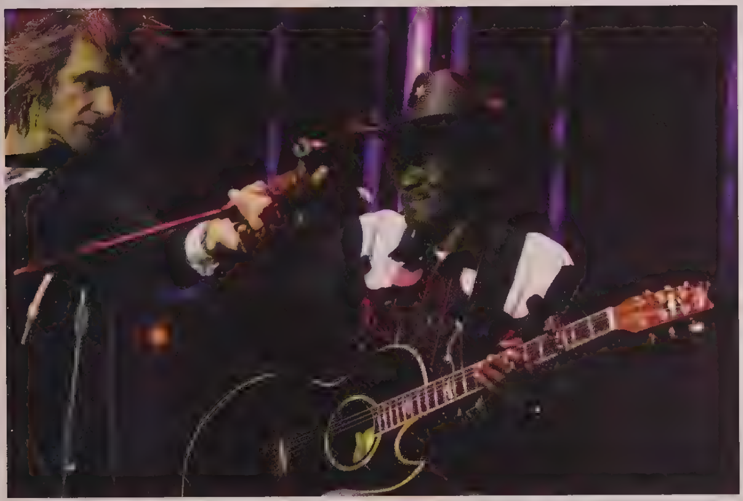
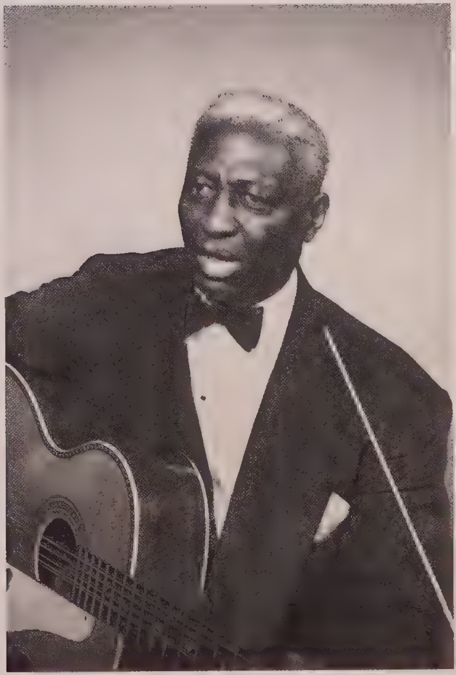


*photo by Janet Macoska*

*Robert Plant, Los Lobos' Louie Perez and David Hidalgo, Alison Krauss*

*"If you try to trace what Lead Belly's influence really was, you'll find it's impossible to circumscribe it. It's so wide, so all-inclusive, all over the world."* **Oscar Brand**

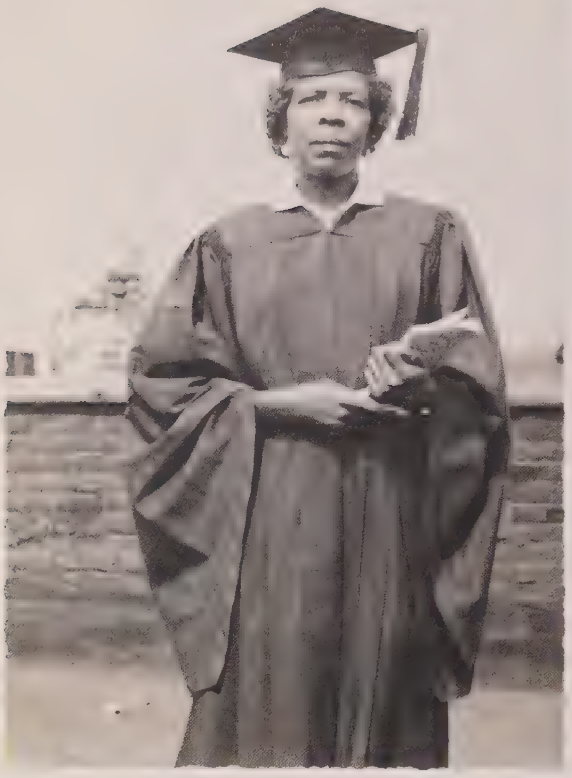




*First Cleveland Concert, March 7, 1948*

Footnote: On March 7, 1948 a tuxedo-wearing Lead Belly appeared with Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, the Duke of Iron and others at an evening concert here at Severance Hall. It would have been great had it been mentioned. It was a benefit for the Progressive Party's presidential campaign for Henry Wallace.

*Upper left: Dan Zanes Middle left: Dan Zanes and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown Lower left: The Cleveland Four — Carlton Fellows, Kennedy Jones, Dr. James H. Houston, Reginald Lewis Upper right: Tiny Robinson and Oscar Brand*



*Aunt Martha Ledbetter* bought a house in Brooklyn a few years after Lead Belly died. She continued to be active in her church choir up until her death in 1968.

*Tiny Robinson*, Lead Belly's favorite niece, lived with him in New York and has worked tirelessly over the years to keep her uncle's musical legacy alive. She lives in Brentwood, Tennessee, with her husband Jim Robinson.

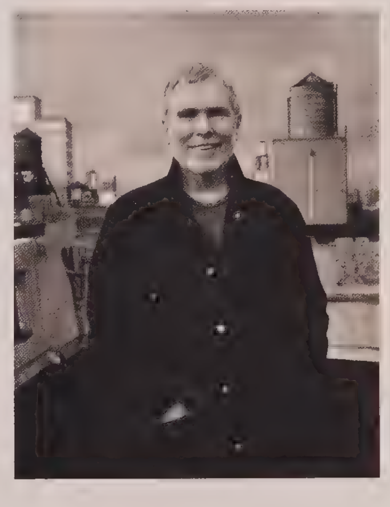
*John Reynolds*, (shown here with Martha, 1955) long-time family friend, confidant, advocate and prodigious researcher for over 50 years, has traveled the world over in search of materials for this collection. He is a landscape gardener in New York City, where he also does the flowers at *Cafe Des Artistes*.

*Sean Killeen* capped a lifelong interest in Lead Belly by founding the Lead Belly Society in 1989. He edited and published the highly acclaimed Lead Belly Letter, a journal that examined the life, music and social history of Lead Belly. Through his efforts, Sean is recognized for having galvanized folklorists, fans, musicians, ethnomusicologists and others to critically appraise the importance of Lead Belly in music, art, and American history. His confidants included seminal figures such as Alex Haley, Shelby Foote, William Styron and Pete Seeger who shared a profound appreciation of Lead Belly's legacy. Sadly both the lives and careers of Lead Belly and Sean F. Killeen were cut short by disease. Following his death in 2003 at the age of 60, Sean Killeen's entire collection of research materials were donated to Cornell University's Sidney Cox Library of Music and Dance.

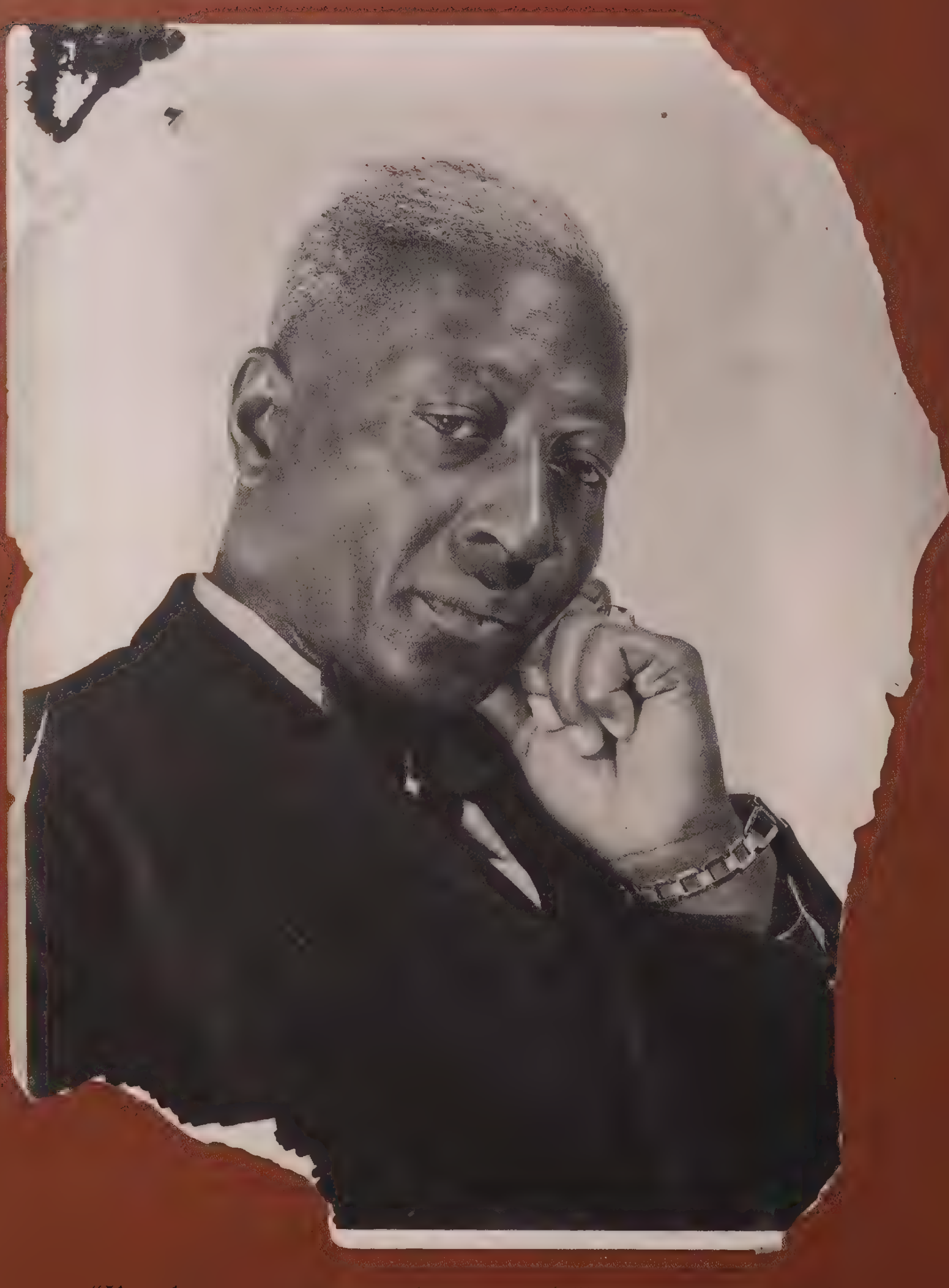
# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Tom Waits.* In a career that spans four decades, Grammy award-winning and internationally renowned Tom Waits has adventurously delved into recording, theater, film, live performance, and literature as both actor and composer. His music, recognized for its distinctive orchestrations and arrangements, has ranged from country, blues, cabaret, waltz, and field hollers to gospel, polkas and marches. He has recorded over 20 albums including last year's acclaimed 3 disc collection *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards* (includes "Goodnight, Irene") and appeared in over 20 films including *Ironweed, Dracula, Down By Law and Short Cuts.*

*Glenn O'Brien,* is a writer who lives in New York. He has written on music for many publications, including Interview, Rolling Stone and Spin. He is a columnist for GQ magazine, novelist, playwright and screenwriter. He edits the literary magazine Bald Ego.



*Tyehimba Jess's* first book of poetry, leadbelly (Verse Press, 2005), is a winner of the 2004 National Poetry Series. He won the 2001 Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Poetry Award, an Illinois Arts Council Artist Fellowship in Poetry for 2000–2001, and the 2001 Chicago Sun-Times Poetry Award. He was on the 2000 and 2001 Chicago Green Mill Slam teams, received a 2005 Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and was a 2004–05 Winter Writing Fellow at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. A proud Cave Canem alumnus, he is a member of the creative writing faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



*"I've been so many places and I've seen so much."*

Huddie Lead Belly

# THANK YOU

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A very special thanks to the Killeen family for their generous cooperation in granting us access to Sean Killeen's Lead Belly collection housed at the Sidney Cox Library of Music and Dance at Cornell University. It was of great help in putting this seemingly endless project together. We also wish to thank the great staff at Steidl for all their help, especially Jonas Wettre for his patience, good-humor, artistic eye, and particularly to Gerhard Steidl, for his long time interest in Lead Belly and for believing in this project from its inception. For everyone's help in making it all come together we are indeed grateful.

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The Lead Belly Foundation. (www.leadbelly.org)

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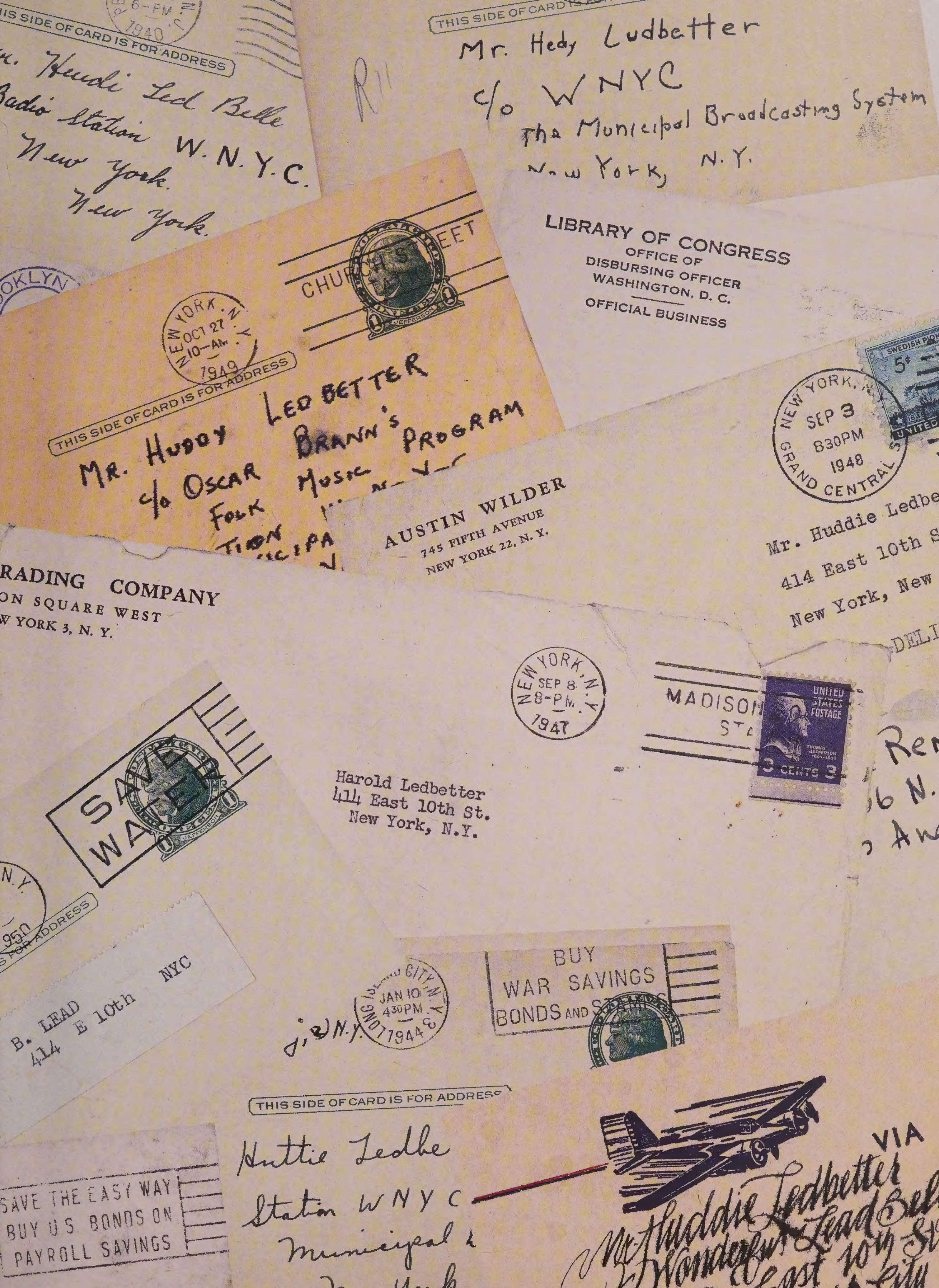

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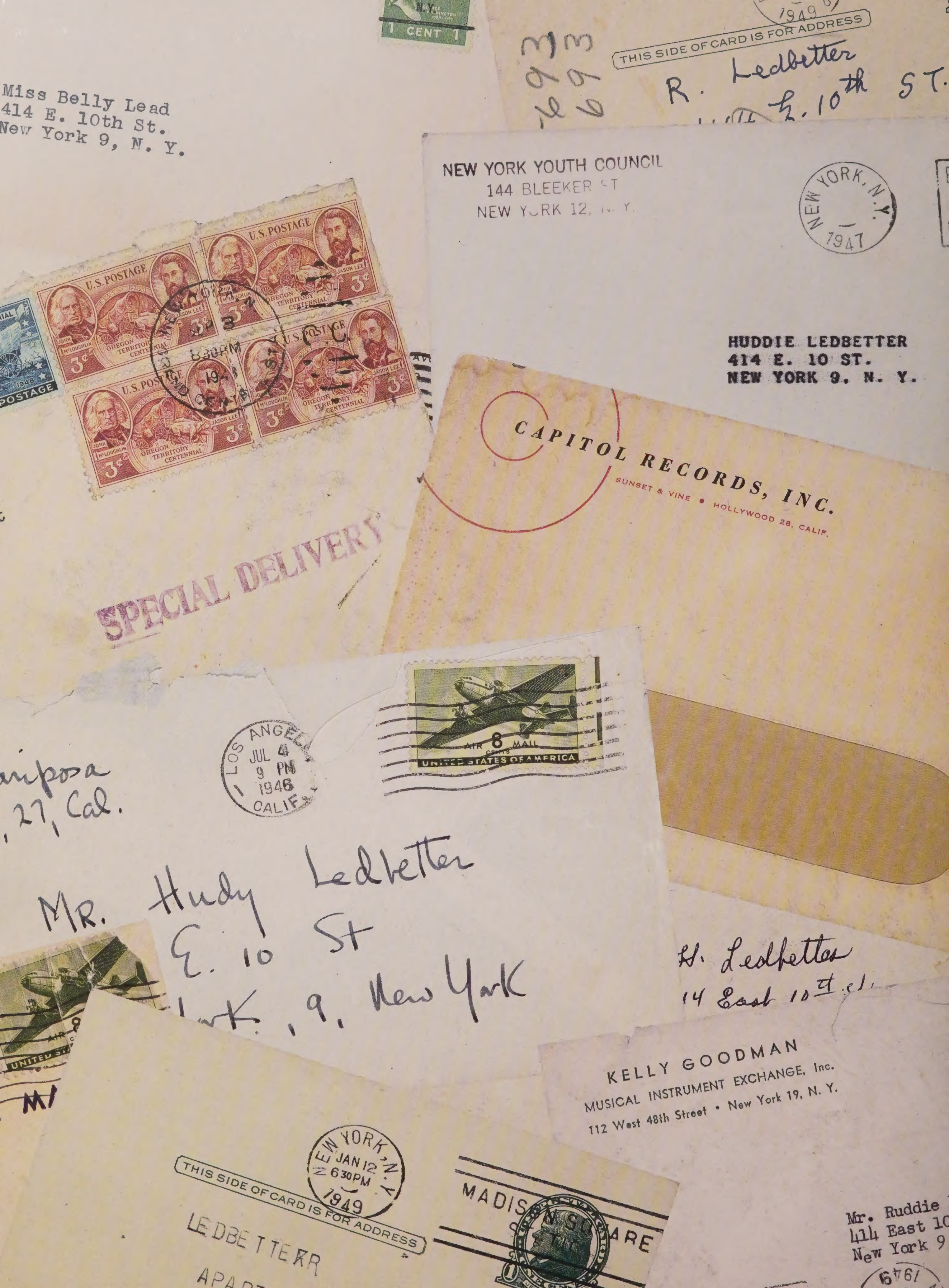

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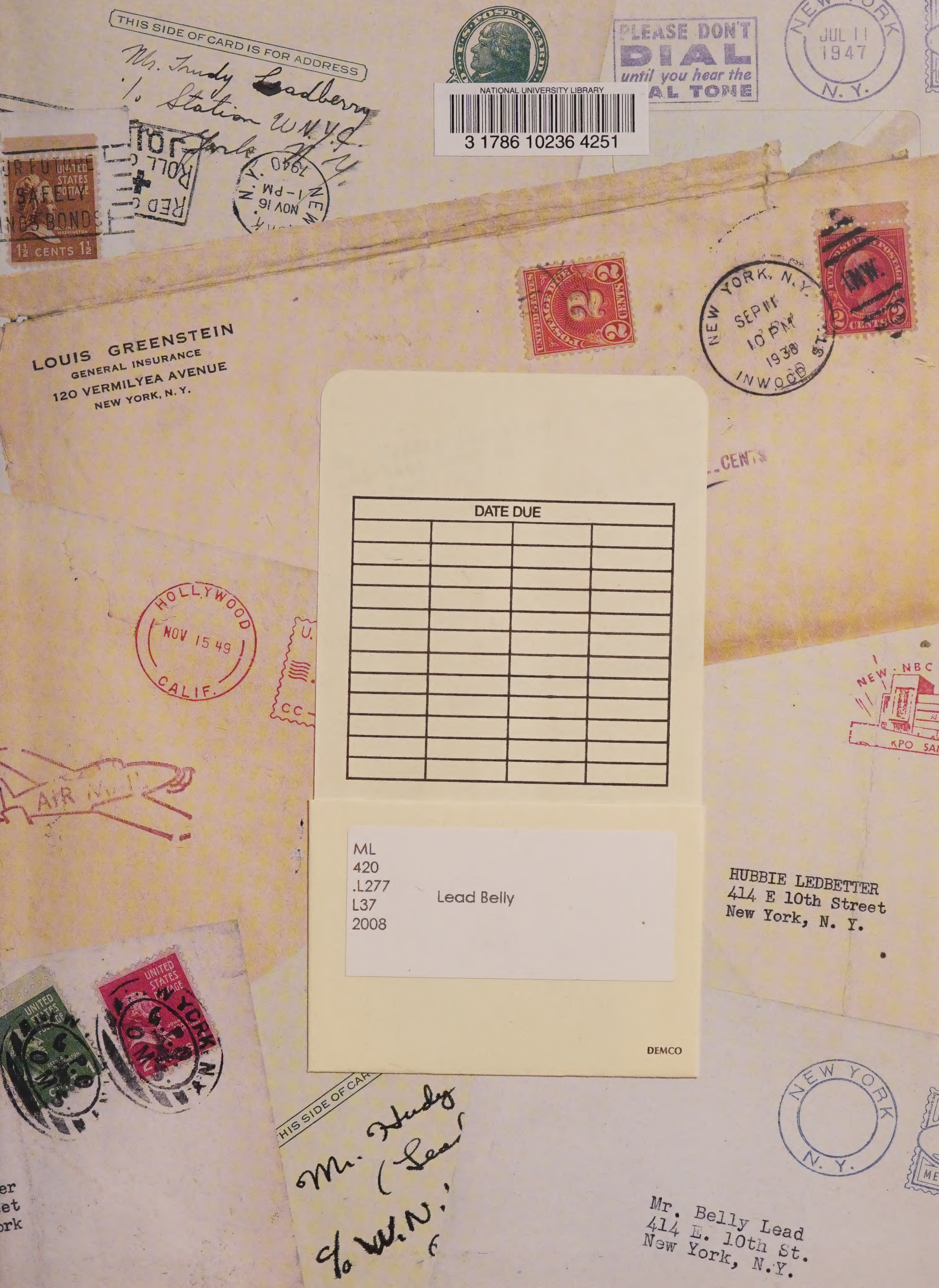
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